

Trails: Pit Miners

Pair 2, Book 2 - Mines

Gail Brown

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Acknowledgements

Dreaming science fiction was something that happened soon after reading my first science fiction book. For years, I wanted to write some. I once had a novel started, although, I never finished and lost the story decade ago.

A tremendous thank you to all who offer help that often you never see the results of. Years later, even decades later, those you help, will remember the assistance you gave.

May this novel assist others on their search for hope and acceptance in world often not designed for them.

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Prologue

Trails Through the Garbage Mines follows Trails Through the Tales as a peek at southern North America approximately 250 to 300 years after Trails Through the Fault Lines and Trails Through the Volcano. Earthquakes and volcanoes reopened the North American Seaway, inundating parts of several states with seawater. In the early, hungry days, animals from zoos were released, or eaten. A small human population survived in a prairie and mountainous region where lions, tigers, and camels now roam. Centuries of warring communities further decimated many populations; at times, leaving several regions without adults, or their history.

Chapter 1

Sweat trickled off Ambrena's forehead. The lodge was lit only by the flickering fire, even though a late fall morning dawned.

"Need Zella." Tanna's breath rose and fell as the contractions increased.

Ambrena pulled her tunic tight across her chest before she stood and tiptoed through the piles to the entry. She had witnessed easy births. Not this complicated of one. Tanna should have called for Zella long ago.

Ambrena ran. Dust billowed up behind her.

One of Tanna's dogs followed.

Too long without rain. Sunshine welcomed them warmly now. Maybe too warmly. Four of the more crowded lodges stood between her and the treasury.

Ambrena dodged children playing in the dusty dirt. She couldn't stop and admire the dust piles they created.

If she knew enough herself, Zella wouldn't have to be found.

I should have stayed with Tanna, not racing off on the errand to find Zella. Garn, Tanna's oldest, should have been sent to find her. Her first opportunity to help at a birth on her own, and she'd already messed it up. They could take her skill status away if Tanna complained to Zella.

Almost gen two girls she used to play with, stacked dry branches beside the treasury for people to fill in wall gaps from the winter winds. Warmth at this season could mean bitter cold to come, and soon. The treasury entry was pinned open to allow any slight breeze to whistle in.

"Are you helping us today?" One of her friends dumped a basket of dried vines from the garden. Another friend nearby had an armful of dried grass to weave summer footwear during the cold season.

"Not today." Ambrena barely paused.

Now, Tanna needed help. If Zella had gone to Shelpit with the miners, Ambrena would have to ask someone to find her. Tanna needed both of them back at the lodge as fast as possible.

"Zella! Are you here?"

Zella stepped into the entry.

Corandra and Henry argued in the background.

"How is Tanna?" Zella shushed the two who had been raised as almost twins.

"She needs you now. Robin is with her until we return."

Ambrena's hand went to her chest. Tanna didn't need to hear those two arguing right now.

Zella stepped back in to grab a bucket of woven cloth.

"Corandra, go help Rusty at Shelpit. She will need you. Henry, come and wait with Robin."

"Rusty doesn't want me to help anymore," Corandra said.

"Robin won't do anything interesting while worrying about Tanna," Henry said.

Zella put her hands on her hips. "Mind me. Both of you. Corandra, tell Rusty I sent you."

"Maybe she'll let me take the camels to the lake." Corandra tapped Henry's shoulder and raced off in the direction of Shelpit.

Those two should play and work well together, since they had been raised together. For some reason, they fought like no one else. Something about their fighting nagged at her memory. A bad memory from when her barely remembered mother died. Sometimes when the two fought, an acidic smoky odor filled her lungs. Even the cooking fire could cause shadowy memories when the two argued.

Ambrena wrapped her arm around Henry's shoulder. A tear threatened to overwhelm one eye. "Come on Henry. Maybe you can show Robin your new project."

Henry pulled away and rubbed his eyes. "There is nothing Robin hasn't taught me already. I don't have anything to share with him he doesn't already know." He ran off down the path toward Lake Kafa.

If Tanna didn't need her and Zella, she'd go after him. The fighting hurt him. More than it hurt everyone else in Shells, who pulled away from them both. They would be gen two adults soon. If they couldn't learn to live in peace with each other, and the rest of the villa, they would probably both be sent away.

Henry cared.

Corandra didn't.

She'd worry about that later. Ambrena pushed aside the entry into Tanna's lodge.

"Zella and I are here." She rushed to the sleeping mat of the woman who had raised her since her mother's death.

Garn and Pamma, Tanna's two children, sat large eyed on the other side of the fire. Pamma whimpered and hugged her doll close. The doll had once been Ambrena and Rusty's treasured, shared companion. It was dirty and raggedy after many seasons between them, and then Corandra's early childhood games in the mud pits. Ambrena really should have been a good older sister, and made Pamma a new one. A special doll no one else had played with before.

"Robin, take Pamma and Garn outside please," Tanna said.

Robin pulled Tanna's son and daughter close. "You'll need me. Dover isn't here."

"No. Zella will call, if I need you." Tanna grimaced from a contraction.

Pamma clutched the dingy doll closer and followed Garn and Robin out the entry.

If Pamma were as old as Garn, she could have stayed inside with her mother. Of course, then they wouldn't need Ambrena.

The contractions increased.

Ambrena held Tanna's hand. Sweat glistened and slowly dripped from each of them as they waited through the early morning fire light.

Zella stepped to the entry "Robin, bring buckets of water. I need some to boil." She stirred up the fire, even though the heat was nearly choking for this late in the fall.

Zella had helped at most of the Shells' villa births.

Ambrena intended to learn all she could from her. She had trained at many births the last few seasons. The first had been Garn's birth, a few seasons after Shells was completely rebuilt, and Pamma, only a few trades ago. Now, Ambrena wanted to be like Zella and Dover, someone who healed, regardless of injury.

The first dog and skill training necklace ceremony for her and Rusty had been held at the last Spring Trade. She touched the necklace. The charms that represented Shells, and her future healer status dangled, almost touching. For now, it was void of a child charm, as it should be in the first gen two season. Her dog, Kara, whimpered against the wall, due to have pups any day.

Contractions came quicker, and harder. Tanna cried out in pain and clutched her sleeping mat.

Ambrena wrung her hands and waited. Zella had taught her what to do, and to be ready. A strange tingling sensation crept up her spine as she watched the woman who had raised her, always so strong and full of life, suddenly weak, and deep in pain. Bringing the next gen into the world was not an act for the fragile. Tanna's age hadn't helped. This pregnancy had been increasingly difficult.

Zella wiped Tanna's forehead with cool water from Lake Kafa.

Tanna wanted this child, who would certainly be her last. A third child of her own. More than many in Shells could claim. Most lodges were full with almost grown children, and orphans, from the dark days.

Those days almost beyond memory were better forgotten. Tanna had taken her, Rusty, and later Rusty's brother Henry to raise as her own. Now, it was time for Ambrena to prove herself to those who believed in the young child she had been.

Without maternal ties, Ambrena could be asked to leave the villa, the only place she remembered living. She wasn't a builder, didn't care for sewing, weaving, mining, or gardening. Learning the healing skills had been her option to contribute to the community. Dover and Robin would need someone trained to replace them, and if she combined their skills with Zella's, no one could dispute her place in the community.

"Focus," Zella said.

Thoughts and fears swirled. She could do this. All she had to do was wait and grab the baby. Ambrena reached forward to squeeze Tanna's hand.

Another contraction forced the smile and unspoken words from Tanna's lips.

Zella helped Tanna to a sitting position, and then handed her tea to sip. The tea might calm the contractions. Mostly, it would relieve some of Tanna's discomfort.

Smoke flittered across Tanna.

Zella closed the entry for privacy. The smoke could only leave through a small flap at the top of the wall now.

As close to the wall as possible, from the sound of their voices, Garn and Pamma chatted. If Pamma grew up interested in healing,

Tanna might prefer her own daughter to take the place of healer in the villa, rather than Ambrena, of an unknown mother.

Zella sat beside her on the ground and pulled a blanket close.

"You can do it."

Ambrena glanced at her, unsure who she was speaking to. She leaned closer and took the fur Zella handed her.

"You're doing well." Zella leaned back, and checked the water on the fire. She chanted a good luck song she frequently sang at births.

The mucus covered head of the baby peeked out into the interior dimness of late morning.

Zella continued singing as she gathered the cleanup cloths into her lap.

Tanna took a deep breath and relaxed.

The infant landed gently on the fur.

Ambrena hugged her tightly to her own chest, and then checked the newborn.

The infant was a girl, and breathing on her own. No visible complications.

She wrapped the newborn in a piece of animal skin before she handed the child to Zella.

Zella wiped the infant clean, and placed her on Tanna's chest.

The newborn girl cried.

"Can we come in now?" Robin peeked in through the entry.

Tanna shook her head.

"No," Ambrena said. "Tanna needs to be alone with her. Baby is fine."

"Is Tanna fine?"

Ambrena checked the blood loss. She thought it was normal. Zella didn't act concerned, and since Tanna was her daughter, surely she would mention if there were a problem.

"What do you think?" Zella said.

"It's a lot of blood loss. Normal, though, I think?"

Zella nodded.

"She'll be fine Robin." Ambrena wiped at the first mess the newest villa child had created.

The infant gurgled.

Tanna held her close.

Sunlight peeked in as the entry opened and Pamma hurried to her mother's side. She couldn't be kept from her mother. Scrambling to a spot beside Tanna, she stared at the infant in the dim light.

Ambrena cleaned up the blood, and made sure no more bright red leaked. She placed a clean beige fur under Tanna's bottom to catch any more blood.

Tanna glanced at Pamma and then at Zella. "Ola will be her name. She is beautiful."

"A healthy newborn." Zella wiped the sweat off of Tanna's face and arms.

Pamma touched Ola's toe. "Will I be able to help raise her the way Ambrena helped raise me?"

Tanna smiled and patted her first birth daughter. "Of course. Now go tell Robin he can come in. He worries so."

Pamma rushed outside.

"Shall I?" Ambrena held the placenta and bloody furs.

"Come back soon." Tanna patted the infant on her chest.

Ambrena nodded.

Smoke circled around her as the cover lifted and Robin walked in followed by Pamma and Garn. A tear threatened to escape one eye, whether from the smoke, or something else, she wasn't sure.

Pamma hugged her, and then ran to Tanna's side.

Chapter 2

Corandra stomped off from the villa treasury. Henry irritated her more than anyone, for some unknown reason. Any other person could say the same words in the same tone, and it meant nothing to her.

People's eyes shifted away as she walked by. It seemed no one wanted her around anymore. No one spoke to her, or answered her questions, unless she called them by name. Except Zella, of course. And Dover, when he was in Shells, and not off trading with the other villas.

An unwatched infant crawled on the ground near the edge of the villa. Her glare did not cause it to change direction toward a sleeping dog. If the infant were at the other end of the villa, and pointed toward the lake, Goddess Kafa might have a snack today.

She covered her mouth. No one wanted to meet Goddess Kafa. Only some of the adults had ever seen her. The Goddess had been known to swallow infants, and even adults, whole. Surely, that was merely a story to scare children and make them do what the adults wanted.

Zella had once threatened to take Corandra to the lake to meet the Goddess after she had fought with Henry. Fighting simply wasn't allowed. No other children, or adults, fought that she knew of. Henry didn't so much fight back, as refuse to allow her to tell him what to do. The people used to side with him, and turned up their noses at her. Lately, the villa had started ignoring them both, regardless of if they fought.

The brushy trail to the herd lodge needed cleaning. Branches and leaves littered the ground, as if the trail cleaners hadn't been here for days. The herd lodge was mostly empty. Several of the camels were on a trading trip to Alma and Tuttle. The horses, except the little ones, were working in Shelpit. Mining began early this season, because of the drought.

Her favorite camel toddled forward and nuzzled her hand. At least Ellie understood her. She wasn't a female dog, and hadn't been given to her as her personal helper. No one begrudged Corandra of her company. Ellie would be more of a help than any old dog. Maybe she should ask for Ellie instead of a dog at her

adulthood ceremony next Spring Trade. No adulthood necklace had been made by Zella that she knew of. Since she didn't have a skill, there was no skill charm to add, or future skill to train for.

Corandra wiped her eyes and opened the entry. Being upset wouldn't do her, or anyone else any good. "Come on Ellie. Maybe you can help."

Ellie lifted her head and stepped over the bottom part of the entry.

As she closed the entry, Corandra glanced around the clearing. These camels and horses had been a part of life as long as she could remember. Rusty, Ambrena, and a few older people, remembered life before horses and camels were part of the villa.

Ellie chewed grass as she followed Corandra to Shelpit.

Rusty once liked her, and tried to help her. Hopefully, bringing Ellie would ease the tension that had arisen between them lately.

She peeked through the limbs at the edge of the trail.

With the ground so hard, the horses helped by bringing water from the lake, to loosen the soil so the miners could dig. Ropes dangled down behind the horses to pull wooden and artifact buckets. Drinking water buckets were already filled for the day. The early morning sun would warm the water to drinking temperature, and the shade of afternoon would cool it.

Rusty directed Shelpit now, when Zella or Tanna couldn't be there. Her friend had always been beside her, playing and learning. Now, her friend was a leader, and Corandra had remained behind, without a role in the villa. People listened to Rusty. They asked her questions, and joked about children and animals. They spoke to her before she spoke, more often than not.

No one ever expected Corandra to be a leader of any sort. Would everyone stop working and stare when she walked out? She took a deep breath and walked into the clearing.

"Glenna, we'll need more leaves to keep the ground damp, can you collect some?" Rusty said.

"Sure, watch Zande for me." Glenna picked up a bucket and left her son playing in the sorted artifacts box.

Corandra and Ellie walked over to the water and sorting station. "Zella sent me to you."

"Oh good," Rusty said. "Can you and Ellie bring leaves too? Check the new trees beyond the broken rocks."

"Sure, may I take some water for us?"

"A few water gourds over there, and a harness for Ellie." Rusty turned back to a group of horses dragging buckets of water for the pit.

Corandra gathered her supplies. At least Rusty hadn't sent them to bring back water. That was exhausting and heavy work for her and young Ellie. However, Rusty was sending her off alone with no one else nearby to pick a fight with. Not that anyone else would fight back.

No one was ever supposed to travel alone beyond the broken rocks. If a lion attacked her and Ellie, they'd hear her screams.

Ellie led, picking her way carefully through the broken stones.

Whatever they had once been, they were no longer. Corandra and Rusty used to play here with Ambrena, and Henry too. She had to figure out why she couldn't stand him. There had to be a reason. Everyone used to ask her. They didn't bother anymore. They merely looked away.

Her own mother, Uden, had abandoned her as an infant to follow Fendon to some distant land. Some place where Zella claimed her own mother had gone when she was a child. Corandra laughed.

Wrinkled and wizened Zella as a child. The other children probably threw apples at her; she looked so unusual. Of course, all of the gen three and four grandmothers must have been children once. And someday, if a man would sponsor her child, she might be a grandmother like Zella.

No, not like Zella. All of the Pit Miners would mourn Zella's death. Would they even notice if she were no longer there? She sniffled. Deep thoughts wouldn't fix the day's troubles, and changing the past wasn't possible.

The land around her faded out as she thought about her mother. She didn't remember her at all really. People told stories, behind raised hands. Her mother might know why she and Henry fought. Perhaps, one day, she would take Ellie and search for her.

Shells would be glad to have her gone. Even Rusty sent her out on her own today, as a practice for being sent to find a new group

of people to live with. Once she was an adult, they'd be ready to send her away. Her necklace would have no charm. No other villa in the community would take her. She and Ellie would be roamers. Alone. Looking for a lodge. Female roamers were rare. With good reason.

Corandra tripped over the rocks. Here was as good a place to gather leaves as any. She bent down and picked up leaves to fill the bucket. Rusty and Zella hoped that someday the trees would spread over these broken rocks, and protect the children from cuts. For some reason, they didn't like these rocks. They seemed no different to her than the broken rocks near each of the other villas. Rough, tumbled, grayed, with the occasional fleck of color if fresh dirt were dug out from under them.

When sorting artifacts, Corandra had heard several people talk about some found items being unsafe. She hadn't found an unsafe one in the buckets she had sorted from Shelpit. Or if she had, Zella and Rusty hadn't told her.

She trudged back toward the main clearing with buckets full of leaves. They had to stop when the buckets tipped over and leaves spilled out.

Laughter stopped as she entered the clearing. People walked away from the sorting area with their digging tools.

Rusty never looked up as she pawed through one of the sorting buckets. "Follow them. They'll show you where they need the leaves."

Corandra sniffled.

Rusty had never totally ignored her. She had always had something to say, a word of warning, or even a smile.

She held her head high, and led Ellie after the women. After dumping her load for them to spread the way they wanted, she turned back.

The women glared at her.

Corandra should have spread the leaves for them. She stomped back to Rusty. "Since I have to stay here, can I at least have digging tools, and dig where I picked up the leaves."

Rusty grunted.

That was unlike her.

Rusty had to be worried about Tanna, or Zella. Tanna wasn't her mother either, though Tanna had raised her. Childbirth was a normal thing. No one had died from it when Robin or Dover had been there. Tanna already had two children, so it shouldn't be a big deal, though she must be older than most women who had newborns.

"Take these." Rusty handed her a piece of metal. "Oh and take the toddler with you please." Rusty pointed to Glenna's son, Zande, digging through one of the sorted buckets and dropping artifacts on the ground.

The old talking piece of plastic hit the ground and started speaking. "Sunshine, come again." These words, and many more it knew. They used to make her laugh, when she was Zande's age. Now she wrinkled her nose and turned away. Why had the ancients had talking boxes? There had been so many people, they could never have met them all, or heard all the stories they had to share.

Arguing would do no good. Maybe the boy could dig for her, at least a little. She held out her hand. "Come on."

The little boy grabbed her hand and held on.

Rusty smiled at him. "How about a ride?" She picked him up and sat him on Ellie's back.

Ellie snorted.

At least she wouldn't have to watch him pick his way through the broken rocks. If he fell and cut himself, Rusty and Glenna would be furious. She carried the tools with her.

One more chore.

Couldn't they leave her alone! Lions might be near, though not too close with the fifty plus people of Shells. And a toddler that wasn't hers. Lion bait.

Beyond the broken rocks, Corandra helped Zande down off Ellie. "Play carefully, and don't wander off!"

The boy laughed and rubbed Ellie's legs.

Ellie swatted him with her tail, and pawed a rock.

Corandra searched the ground for a suitable place to dig. It didn't look as if anyone had ever dug here since Shells had been founded when she and Henry were infants, even younger than Zande.

If she could find something that would be valued, the community might want to keep her. It was worth a try. Perhaps the Goddesses would listen to her plea.

A shallow depression near the broken rocks might hold promise, or at least an easy place to dig. She sat down, flicked her hair onto her back, and pushed aside loose leaves.

Nothing visible on the ground. Her piece of metal would have to do the work. It wasn't much good, and already half rusted through. She raked at the top layer to check for softness.

Zande grabbed sticks nearby and stacked them.

The ground shifted, slowly at first. The more she dug, the more her anger fled. A hand's width down, the piece of metal struck something. Corandra smiled. She really had found something. All by herself, she had found it! She glanced up to see the boy further away. "Come help me dig."

Zande toddled over to her. He helped scrape the dirt away. "Draw?"

"Not now. Tonight at the fire maybe." Adults ignored her drawing with Zande in the ashes by the fire pit. She'd long ago used up all the white rock for drawing pictures on other rocks. Maybe more was buried here, away from the main villa.

A red container, her favorite color. Buried in the ground. If she worked the soil loose enough, it might slide out easy. Maybe she could keep it, if it was undamaged. Especially if she had to leave Shells, she'd need something to carry a little food, water, and a change of clothes. Zella's nutria stew would be a lingering memory soon. The bitter taste of the meat mingled with the sweet flavor of herbs. Even if it wasn't her favorite meal, she'd miss it.

"Stand back."

The boy toddled back to Ellie, who sniffed the container.

Corandra grabbed it, and pulled it out of the ground. As it loosened, it made a swooshing noise as air replaced the container. She placed it on the ground beside the hole. The lid was still intact. The hole had to be filled in before someone fell into it.

Loose rocks would do. Several were nearby. She picked up a few and turned to see the boy had opened the container. How dare he! She had first right to see what was in it.

"Put the lid down!" She ran over to the boy and dropped the rocks in the hole. It would have to do for now. Later, she'd come back and fill it in.

The lid sat sideways on the container. She lifted it. Small bottles of something lined the bottom, surrounded by those little white things that made noise when crunched. She handed a few of the white pieces to the boy. They would keep him busy during the walk back.

Chapter 3

Rusty waved at Glenna who could now work uninterrupted.

Zande rode Ellie out of Shelpit beside Corandra.

If there were some way Corandra could encourage others, instead of scaring them.

Today wasn't the day to worry about her. Shelpit needed her to guide the diggers and sorters. This pile, the last basket brought to the sort station last night, not even gone though, couldn't hold her interest.

Her hands fell to her side as she stared at the sky. Tanna needed her help. Zella said she was safe. In the back of her mind, she worried. Before both Pamma and Garn were born, her hands had shook, and nightmares returned. Before this birth, the nightmares had been far worse, and even Henry had asked if she was okay.

If the Goddesses Kafa and Amber saved Tanna, she might keep her place in the community. Tanna had helped raise her equally as both second mother, and a sister. Without her, she would only have her brother Henry.

She had to lead the dig at Shelpit, and allow Zella and Ambrena to take care of Tanna. Her hands shook as she dropped the artifacts in them.

Ambrena.

The villa said Ambrena was the memory of Goddess Amber. Though no one ever said a word directly to her, the villa held her, and her words, at double their weight. Rusty almost dared to ask Ambrena if Tanna would survive. Life would change drastically if Tanna died. The Mad Gods might even reawaken, as they had when Tanna had been her age.

Rusty's lips trembled. It wouldn't do for others to see her with teary eyes. Directing the dig kept her busy. Sorting was her favorite part. Today, the piles held nothing they needed. If they could learn the ancestor's secrets of how to make the metals, they could make all the tools they needed. So few had been found. They didn't last long above ground. She had given her best piece to Corandra today.

Morning crept by, as she waited on Ambrena to send someone to report on Tanna.

Corandra and Zande walked back into the clearing.

A red box hung in Ellie's harness.

Rusty drew a deep breath. Red often meant trouble. If anyone else in the group had found it, she wouldn't worry. Zella should be here.

"Glenna, go check on Zella please."

She had to tread carefully. Corandra would snap like a nutria over the littlest things these days.

Glenna hugged her son, and handed him some white crinkly artifacts.

They could be for anything. Zella always said to watch out for them. Sometimes, they were safe. Sometimes, not. Wet ones would make you sick. Dry ones could have been wet once.

Corandra unhooked the box.

"What did you find?" Rusty asked.

"A pretty box. Maybe I can keep it? I don't have one of my own."

"Perhaps Zella will give it to you. What was in it?" Rusty walked over to the box.

Zande toddled to the box as Corandra opened it. He reached in and grabbed a bottle. One of glass. He held it above his head.

Ellie shied away.

The boy dropped the bottle and it burst.

He sat down and touched the liquid.

"Come child," Rusty said. "Stay away from the box."

There had been letters on the bottle. Her heart raced.

"Come on everyone, let's go eat. Glenna will be back with news soon. You too Corandra. No one will disturb the box." Rusty led the boy away, and hoped Corandra followed.

In the shade, the group of miners rested. The boy played. The bottle might not be dangerous after all. Once, when Trapper was still alive, he had opened such a bottle and his skin had burned to an unsightly and painful rash that never went away. Almost at once, his arm was scarred for the last few seasons of his life.

Glenna walked into the clearing with Zella.

"Tanna had a baby girl, and named her Ola," Zella said.

Relief flooded through Rusty. She wouldn't lose the one mother she truly remembered. Zella could never replace Tanna.

"Zande broke some glass in a box Corandra found." Rusty quickly explained what had happened with the bottle.

Zella looked at his hands, concern etched on her face. "He looks okay. Bottles still there?"

Corandra nodded.

"Everyone stay here. Rusty, come with me."

Rusty led Zella over to the red box.

Corandra followed them. "Zella, please let me keep the box. I'll need one when you send me away."

No one Rusty knew wanted to send Corandra away. They wanted her to cooperate with others, and behave normally. She glanced at the younger girl and then focused on the box.

"I need to see it first," Zella said.

No one ever argued with Zella. Or Dover for that matter.

Zella moved the lid to the side and looked at the bottles. She picked up the broken bottle. "Tussis. There has to be more."

She turned the bottled in her hand, and sat it down carefully. The crinkly white artifacts slid around and covered up the bottles. Zella pulled out another bottle and touched the writing. "Letters are faded. Some are missing. 'Typ,' then two unreadable letters, and a 'd.'" Zella turned pale, and pushed the lid aside.

Tension in the air mounted. The breeze stopped, holding a packet of extreme heat around the box and the women.

"Another bottle has the word 'pox' on it." Zella looked up at Rusty. "I'm not sure. The ancestors had bad things to say about pox."

More bottles nestled among the crunchy white artifacts. She moved her hands through them, and counted aloud. "One, two, three, four, there's something else down here."

Her hands moved deep inside the box. Zella glanced at Rusty. "Bring some sun warmed water please, and wipe the sides of the box."

Rusty brought the water and wiped one side of the box. A black triangle with broken corners appeared. Inside the triangle was an arrangement of broken circles. She gasped and looked up to Zella.

Zella stood up and replaced the lid on the box. "Corandra, I need to see where you found this. Rusty, do not go to the villa. Go to the lake and bathe. Take Zande and Corandra with you. I must find Dover. Now."

"Glenna took Zande with her to the villa," Rusty said.

Zella shaded her eyes. "Find her. Send the rest on to the lake. Everyone who had contact with her too."

"What is it?" Rusty asked.

Zella covered the red box. "No idea. Not taking chances. Now go!"

When Zella commanded, no one slowed down. Rusty ran to inform the rest of the miners. She rustled them off down the water path, and then raced to the villa.

What had the letters meant? Ambrena would know. She mustn't go near her though. Whatever it was might be passed directly to her, Tanna, and baby Ola.

Zella would be angry at her mistakes today.

Brush blocked the path as she ran.

She wanted to scream for Glenna as she reached the villa. That would never do. It would scare her, and everyone else. Her heart beat wildly as she slowed to a fast walk, caught her breath, and walked to the lodge she shared with Glenna. "Glenna?"

No answer.

Rusty checked each lodge toward the center of the villa. One woman said she had seen her following Zande to Tanna's.

Her heart pounded deep in her chest. If Zella knew, what would she do? Rusty had been exposed to whatever was in that crate. Tanna's baby couldn't be exposed. She ran to Tanna's.

Glenna and her son sat outside.

Rusty drew a deep breath, "Who all have you spoken to since coming back to the villa?"

Glenna laughed. "About everyone. Little Ola is so beautiful."

"You've seen her?"

"Most certainly. I always welcome the newborns. Zande was eager to see her."

Rusty hid her head in her hands. "Come on. We have to hurry everyone to go to the lake and bathe quietly."

Tanna stepped into the entryway. "What's wrong?"

Rusty gulped. She looked up to the woman who had raised her, and helped raise her brother. "What is tussis?"

Tanna screamed and covered her mouth.

Robin ran out the entry behind her, and grabbed her as she fell.

"What did you say Rusty?"

"The torn bottle paper said tussis." The faces around her were pale. She was sure the blood had left her face as well.

He grabbed the alarm horn and blew.

Everyone in the villa stopped whatever they were doing and gathered close.

Rusty shrank against the lodge. What could she do? What had she done? If she hadn't let Corandra go off on her own, the box wouldn't have been found. The bottle wouldn't have been broken. It had seemed like the best way to keep her busy and happy, for everyone.

Robin's form wavered through the tears in her eyes.

She wanted to reach out to someone, anyone. Her necklace with the Shells' villa and dig charms banged against her chest.

Henry ran around the corner of the lodge.

Rusty grabbed him, and held on, something stable in her world. She had vowed never to give up on her baby brother. Now she feared for her life, as well as those around her. Their mother's forgotten last words echoed. Henry was the hope of their community.

Chapter 4

Ola cried the normal sleepy cry of a contented newborn. A little soft perhaps, not unusual for a newborn's first day.

Ambrena tucked the loose rabbit furs around her. A few days experiencing the world, and she would be well and strong.

Outside, Rusty spoke to Glenna.

Tanna stood awkwardly, and walked to the entryway.

Ambrena cooed at Ola, touching her soft cheek. Someday, if she had her own child, maybe her place in Shells would be secure. There was no one in Shells she'd invite to sponsor her first child though. All the men her age were more like her brothers than potential sponsors.

Tanna fell backwards.

Robin ran to her.

Ambrena held Ola close and rushed forward. Tanna didn't scare easily. "What is it?"

When Robin blew the horn, it startled her, and woke Ola to fuss and cry.

Rusty stepped back.

"Go, all of you! Down to Lake Kafa. We must bathe quietly and quickly. Then return to our own lodges and not go out unless we have to," Robin said.

The people listened. They grumbled a little. A break in the water would be nice after listening to the birth of a baby. Washing the summer's dust off, would cheer the children and mothers as well.

"Robin, should we go?" Tanna asked.

Robin watched as word spread through the crowd surrounding their lodge.

Everyone knew the dangers of pit mining. Nothing serious had ever happened before. At least, not as long as Ambrena could remember. They stayed anyway, and most helped all they could. What the scare was, and how it would affect them, Robin would tell her soon, she hoped.

"Remember Trapper. Go quickly," he said. "I'll follow behind with clean furs and clothes."

"I'll carry Ola." Ambrena gathered the newborn in her furs. Tanna rested her hand on Ambrena's shoulder.

The trip to the lake was long and slow. Many passed them on their trek back. They all stopped and waited on Tanna and Ambrena to pass. Robin stayed behind them.

Lake Kafa, lodge of the Kafa Goddess. Ambrena knew she had seen the Goddess once. Tanna had told the story frequently during ceremonies. The Goddess had not been seen again since that day, though some had noticed giant ripples on the lake's surface when they fished too long on sunny days.

Today, the lake appeared peaceful, though who knew what danger lurked deep beneath the lapping waves. She shivered as she stepped into the shallow area, where people washed their clothes. Anything could hide in here.

Scrubbing didn't take long. The warm water at this end would feel good to Tanna so soon after the baby was born.

Fresh blood trickled down Tanna's leg. Her face turned pale.

Zella glanced at Ambrena, and stepped in front of Tanna, helping her up to the bank.

If the blood loss were too great, Zella would say so. There was nothing she could do until they returned to the lodge anyway.

Back at the villa, Ambrena pulled her bed close to Tanna's. "I'll be here."

"I know," Tanna whispered. "I can't believe what was found."

"It can't be good if Robin is worried."

"Wait until Zella and Rusty return to hear the whole story." Tanna rocked Ola in her arms. "I'll keep her as safe as I can."

Ola closed her eyes and slept.

Tanna's eyes closed.

Ambrena pulled a cover over Tanna and tucked it in. Bright red splattered the beige fur. More blood loss now was not good.

Zella, Rusty, and Robin walked into the lodge, and closed the entry cover.

Rusty sat beside Ambrena and grabbed her hand.

"I sent Henry and Glenna's brother to find Dover. They should be back soon anyway," Robin said.

Tanna tried to lean on one arm. Her eyes fluttered from the strain of the night and day.

"We need light, and we need to talk without everyone hearing." Zella closed the entry.

"You always said no secrets," Tanna said. "We couldn't keep one anyway, not here."

"It's not the secrets. We have to understand the complexity of the situation before we can decide what to do. There are many things those letters could mean. We have to work through our memories to decide what we think it means. I wish we had the clay tablets my mother had."

"Tanna, can you make the trip back to the lake? I know you are exhausted," Robin said.

"Too far," Tanna said. "We can go to Trapper's. No one can hear us there."

"Sunlight would be nice too," Ambrena said. Flickering firelight made today too spooky. She helped Tanna up.

They walked slowly, so Tanna could lean on Robin.

People peeked out at them from covered entries.

Their friends and neighbors would not be happy with this situation. The leaders shouldn't look like they were abandoning the villa to the consequences of Corandra's find.

She and Zella would have a lot of comforting and explaining to do.

Outside the villa, they sat beside Trapper's old lodge. It had been abandoned after he died a few seasons before. Many young children liked to play in it, almost out of hearing from the rest of the villa. It was too close to the trees for most people to want to live alone there. Though some people would stay a night there once in a while, when they wanted to be alone, or with someone special.

The lodge entry was open. Robin went inside to verify it was empty.

Tanna sat on the ground against the lodge.

A small rock made a seat for Ambrena. Ola slept in her arms.

Zella sighed as she sat down. "I didn't dare draw on bark the letters. The ancestors spoke of many horrors that lay hid behind the symbol on the box. Among them, vials containing illnesses spread through the air. I think we need to go to the Kafa Goddess and ask for appeasement."

Rusty rubbed her eyes. "I thought I did the right thing, by letting Corandra be by herself."

Zella patted her knee. "You couldn't know what she would find. Where is she anyway?"

No one answered. If she had taken the box, she might spread the devastation.

"I'll find her." Rusty stumbled on a tree root as she stood up. Her head hit the side of the lodge.

"Be careful," Zella said.

"Should I go to?" Ambrena said. Perhaps Corandra would listen to her. They had once been close.

"Stay," Tanna said. "I think Rusty should too. We need to understand first."

"I have to find her. I'll check Zella's lodge first." Rusty ran down the deserted path to the lodges.

Ambrena wanted to follow her. Corandra would feel guilty, like she always did after a fight with Henry. This calamity, could permanently affect the whole community.

"I don't remember any tales about tussis," Ambrena said.

"It's not the whole name," Robin said. "In fact, it may be one of many names."

Ola cried as her arms pulled free from her fur covering.

Tanna patted her, trying to comfort her. Blood splattered on her leg.

Robin reached for Tanna's hand, and held it close.

"The paper I've found doesn't say much about them," Zella said. "Red containers like that one can be deadly. And the words weren't fully on the bottles, some had worn partially off."

Robin sifted some sand over a pebble. "I hope Dover returns soon."

He traced the dried blood on Tanna's leg. "I fear it is an infectious disease. Whether its danger is more, less, or the same, after all these gens, even Dover may not know."

"Should we re-bury it?" Ambrena asked.

"Future gens would find it," Robin said. "Then it would affect them. And if anyone like Blake or Orid found it." He shuddered.

Ambrena didn't really remember either one of them. People whispered stories about Blake's death. Those stories were far worse than the villa's fear of either Goddess Kafa, or even Goddess Amber. Zella always promised the Goddesses were there to help

them, and direct the lives of those who listened. To hear and share her wishes would give her status, almost equal to Zella's when she was a new adult.

A horse carrying Dover and Henry raced into the clearing. Dover slid off onto the ground. "Take the horse to the herd lodge. Stay there for now."

Henry turned away with the horse.

Robin quickly updated Dover. "I'm not sure which it is."

Dover shook his head. "If it is what I fear, early symptoms would seem typical for late fall illness. Sneezing, cold, wet nose, and runny fluids. Not good. Children could die. Some of us adults too."

"We have to do something." Ambrena clenched her hands. People couldn't die, not from a broken bottle in a box.

"We will. Tanna and I will prepare a ceremony to appease Goddess Kafa. Now go. Inform everyone to meet at Kafa Sighting before sundown. We will need a bonfire." Zella helped Tanna up, and they went into Trapper's lodge.

Dover left a basket of herbs by the entry.

Waiting until almost sundown would be a long day. At least she could prepare the bonfire pile.

At Kafa Sighting though? People rarely went there. That was the place Goddess Kafa had passed judgment on Blake. She shivered. Visions of that day, and screams flitted through her mind. His screaming body sinking into the gaping mouth in the lake.

It couldn't be real, could it?

It was a horror story mothers told their kids to make them be good. Or was it?

Zella had said Ambrena stood and watched as it happened. The memory could be the result of the stories imprinted on her brain.

"I'll notify people, and be there to help you soon," Robin said. "You okay?"

Ambrena nodded. "I don't want to see Goddess Kafa. I don't remember her."

"Be glad," Dover said. "I hope we don't see her either. Though perhaps seeing her would be for the best. There may be some secret she holds that could save us."

"I hope we don't have to leave Shells. Rusty can't find metal anymore." She looked at him, trying to determine if he realized how dangerous this could be.

Without metal, there would be no strong tools.

No tools would mean no food, either by hunting, or gardening. If this broken bottle didn't kill their villa, starvation could in the next few seasons. Some of the miners, sorters, and even people from the other villas, had begun to complain that they didn't have enough metal for tools. Wood tools would work for a while for some things, like the Tuttle looms. Without metal, the wooden tools couldn't be replaced.

Dover sighed. "I know. I hoped I would die of old age before your little mine ran out."

"Is it really mine?"

He nodded. "You found it, remember?"

Ambrena shook her head. There was so little she remembered from those early seasons. When she tried to remember her mother's face, a picture of ash and flame, like the fire they cooked by, blocked her memory.

Dover patted her shoulder. He and Robin hurried to the first lodge of the villa.

People stared out of entryways as she hurried back through the villa to the trails leading to the lake. The walk to Kafa Sighting was a long trail, seldom kept up. Brush and brambles grew across it, and tripped her bare feet as she hurried.

Along the way, she stopped by a clearing she went to when she wanted Goddess Amber to hear her. If she listened. Would she really listen to an orphan who couldn't even remember her own mother, or the day her mother died?

The moss covered rock rested between the trees. She sat carefully on it, and looked up to the sky. "Please Goddess Amber, if you hear me, help me, as you helped our ancestors. Please don't be angry and awaken the Mad Gods."

She sat a while longer, enjoying the peace in a place where no one else visited. No sign she had been heard. Then again, peace was expected to be quiet. If Goddess Amber were angry, surely she would let her know by shaking the trees with a mighty wind.

Chapter 5

Leaves drifted onto Corandra's head.

Ellie snorted nearby.

Zella's face had been pale and drawn as she read the bottle contents.

Corandra knew that look. This wasn't what she should have found. There would be serious consequences for sure. She would be sent from the one villa she had ever known. No one wanted her here.

Sniffling wouldn't help.

Zella glanced at the location where she had found the box. Nearby, the ground remained dry and untouched. She hadn't stayed long.

Corandra called out to her.

Zella didn't answer as she rushed from the clearing.

Her mouth gaped. She stood up and leaned against Ellie. "Will they let me keep you? It doesn't matter. Zella didn't take you away when she left me here. I am going to take you with me. I have to find a few things. Surely, they won't mind me taking a little food. If I hadn't messed up so bad, I might have been welcome at Tuttle, or Alma, if I had any skills."

Ellie stomped her foot.

"You stay here. I'll be back."

Corandra walked through the pathway to Shelpit. It was eerily empty. The sun bounced off the buckets of artifacts that had been dug that day. Two lay tilted on their sides, contents scattered about for birds and small beasts to gather. She should stop and cover them, to protect the villa's hard work.

Picking up one bucket, she filtered through it quickly. Mostly rotten wood, nothing of value to them, or even the wildlife. She dropped the bucket back on the ground, and left it alone. A gentle breeze whisked away the leaves she had placed on the damp soil.

Corandra shivered. Something was wrong. The miners should have returned from the lake.

Brush in the path slowed her progress. Someone had run down the path and knocked several limbs into the pathway. Perhaps she should go back to Ellie now. Corandra took a deep breath and

pushed the brush away. She had the right to take her clothes at least. No one else would wear them.

Her heart pounded as she picked up speed. At the entrance to the villa, she stopped. No one was in sight. No children played. Dogs snored beside their lodges. Flying bugs buzzed in the sunshine.

People should be there. The people wouldn't have left their lodges to her. She walked carefully down the path. Entry covers fluttered. Eyes peeked through. No one spoke. A baby cried in the distance.

Corandra ran into the lodge she shared with Zella. No one was there. She pinned the flap back for light and checked her sleeping corner. Her other clothes were behind her bed furs. Food storage was by the entry. Dried nutria, nuts, and a few carrots. It wasn't much. She wrapped a handful, maybe a day's food, in her clothes.

"Please don't go," Rusty said. "We need you." Standing in the entryway, she blocked sunlight, and Corandra's escape. Rusty looked so much like her brother, that even the sight of her made Corandra turn away.

"The whole villa wants me gone, I better go."

Rusty walked in and held out her hand. "Wait. At least until Dover comes. He is meeting with Zella, Tanna, Robin, and Ambrena now."

Corandra sighed. "If I leave now, maybe I can stay at Alma or Tuttle, one night, anyway."

"Please?" Rusty said.

"I don't know why I am the way I am. I have to be strong now. I'll be a roamer. I can't be weak." She tried to pull away.

Rusty stepped on the bundle. "It would be weak to run away from the problem now. You have to stay until we know what it is, and what we can do to fix it."

Corandra pulled back. "I don't want you fixing my problems anymore."

Rusty crossed her arms. "I'm not fixing your problems. You are almost an adult now. Don't run away from your life. You need me, and the whole villa, as much as we need you."

Corandra grabbed at the bundle. "No one acts like it."

The bundle gave way, and Corandra fell backwards holding it.

"There are things you don't know," Rusty said.

"Maybe I need to know them."

The entry cover closed and hid the light.

"Rusty, Corandra, I'm here. We have work to do," Ambrena said.

"I want to leave now," Corandra said.

Ambrena grabbed her shoulder. "This mess is not all your fault. Zande broke the bottle." She released her hold.

"We are going to Kafa Sighting to build a bonfire. No one can leave until after tonight. Understood?"

Corandra nodded and hugged her bundle tighter. "I'm keeping my bundle ready."

"Fine. Now come help us gather wood for the giant bonfire. Everyone else has to stay inside until then. Where is Ellie?"

Corandra tucked her bundle under her furs. "I left her at Shelpit."

"Good. You and Rusty go bring her, and I will meet you at Kafa Sighting."

Ambrena had become so bossy in the last few seasons. Repeating Zella and Tanna's orders. It stung when she did so.

Another day wouldn't make a difference. Corandra flounced out of the lodge and down the path to retrieve Ellie. She and Rusty left Ellie's harness on, and walked her the long way around to Kafa Sighting.

Ellie helped them pull loose wood laying around into a pile. With three young women and a camel, it didn't take too long.

"When will they be here?" Corandra dangled her feet in the lake.

"Before dark." Ambrena set a leaf loose on the water and looked up to Corandra on the bank beside her. "Do you really want to know your past?"

Corandra stared out across the water. "This place bothers me. I know Blake was sacrificed here."

Ambrena took her hand. "Blake's hunters killed Rusty and Henry's mother and sponsor."

"That doesn't have anything to do with me, or why I fight with Henry." Corandra tried to pull away. "My mother was Uden, and Fendon was probably my sponsor. I don't remember either. They weren't related to Blake, were they?"

Ambrena closed her eyes. "Fendon wasn't your sponsor. Uden couldn't bare the sight of you when you grew to look like the man she feared."

"No. Don't say I'm a rattler." Corandra pulled her hands away. The law said she should never have lived to see daylight if that were true.

Ambrena grabbed her hands. Her eyes brimmed with tears. "It is true. Uden and Fendon left together. They come back every Spring Trade to check on you. Your mother wanted the best for you. She thought if she left, the villa could raise you to be okay, and not be like Blake, more like Jorn."

Jorn was a rattler who had been raised as Zella's brother. He had left to join Uden and Fendon. A nice enough person, at least in villa lore. "Does Rusty know?" Corandra tried to breathe and remain upright.

"I think so," Ambrena said. "She should know. She is older than me, and was there when Uden was confronted. Does she remember? Difficult to say."

Ambrena shook Corandra's arms. "Rusty cares about you, as does Henry. We want you to stay. I remember wanting to bring you with me to Tanna and Robin's before Garn was born. Zella and Dover thought it might be better to raise you and Henry together."

Corandra turned to the lake. "I should be out there, shouldn't I?"

"No." Ambrena said. "Come on. You've always been a little sister to me, and I don't want you to leave. I'd worry, not knowing where you are."

"Or what trouble I am causing?"

"That to. The villa will be here soon. Dry your tears and stay a while. You will find your place in the villa life flow."

The lake sparkled as her tears dried. Deep shadows filled the beach area. Soon, people arrived and the area around the prepared bonfire became crowded.

Corandra tried to stay on the outside of the crowd.

They kept pushing her to the middle.

As dusk turned into darkness, Tanna and Zella arrived.

Together, they lit the bonfire.

It shimmered on the lake.

Tanna stood before the bonfire, facing the lake. "Goddess Kafa, we ask for your protection from this unknown artifact from the ancestors."

A splash echoed through the stillness. Everyone turned, though nothing was visible on the lake. People shuffled closer to the bonfire.

Zella waited with her arms raised high above her head. "Shall we stay here and wait?"

No sound, other than Ola softly murmuring.

Corandra stepped closer to the lake.

Could she see the Goddess?

Zella's voice droned behind her.

Would her sponsor's spirit be in the lake? Perhaps that was why she had such a bad temper, not because of who he was. He was here, influencing her, knowing she was his child. Maybe, if she found Uden and Fendon, they would tell her it wasn't true. Or, if Jorn were still alive and with them, maybe he could help her. Where were they, anyway?

Corandra slipped into the water and pushed off from the cliff edge under the tree. If the Goddess still existed, she would find her, and find a solution to save her, and her villa.

Chapter 6

The bonfire burned low. People became restless.

Rusty stood up with the flames behind her. "Robin and Dover have decided. We must use caution. Tonight, stay in your own lodges. Tomorrow back to normal routines, with one exception. No one can travel or trade with the other villas until we are sure no one is sick. There will be no mining tomorrow."

"How long will it take?" Glenna held Zande close.

Dover and Zella didn't know.

Rusty reached out and touched Zande's dangling foot. "Zella, Dover, or Ambrena will check with each of you every day until they decide it's safe."

Sparks flew as Ambrena stirred the bonfire.

"Ambrena doesn't know enough." Someone shouted.

Voices murmured.

"Ambrena knows enough. She will tell us immediately if she is concerned, and we will visit you ourselves." Dover waved his arms and the smoke from the bonfire trailed them.

More people murmured. "What are we looking out for?"

Zella covered her eyes. "I wish I knew. Coughing, cold, sneezing, anything that lasts longer than normal for fall weather. Find us as soon as you recognize symptoms."

"What are you doing with the rest of the box?" Glenna asked.

"What about Corandra? Is she okay?"

"Isn't she the cause of the trouble as usual?" One of the gen three men said.

Dover held his hand up. "The box and Corandra will be dealt with after we determine if anyone becomes sick. For now, please don't blame Corandra. She found the box. She didn't break the bottle."

The ceremony continued with Dover, Zella, Tanna, and Ambrena speaking for the villa to the Kafa Goddess.

The fire flared again. Ambrena stepped toward the villa, raised her arms, and asked Goddess Amber to watch over them.

The people murmured as they tromped back to their lodges.

Rusty stayed behind with Zella to put out the fire.

"You sure?" Zella said.

"Corandra slipped into the water a while ago. I hope she didn't hear the comment about her. I have to find her. I'll bring her back to your lodge, and we'll stay there." Rusty lugged a bucket of water from the lake.

Zella dumped the bucket on the remaining embers. Sparks flew into the night air. "I'll finish here. You find her."

Rusty plucked a still lit branch from the embers. Finding Corandra in the dark, and their way back would be scary. No stars or moon were out, and the branches blocked the light from the villa fire pits. A thick bank of clouds threatened rain. Mining in the morning would be impossible, no problem since they couldn't leave their lodges anyway. Of course, rain had been withheld so long, everyone would be thankful.

Her heart beat louder. Corandra wasn't scared enough to offer herself to Goddess Kafa was she?

Rusty ran down the path beside the lake. "Corandra, where are you?" She stumbled and the light on the branch fizzled out. Darkness descended. Frogs croaked and small animals slithered and slid in the leaf litter by the lake. Shivers ran up her spine. Alone in the dark, even this close to the villa she could step on a snake, or be attacked by a night hunter.

"Corandra, my light went out. Where are you?" Rusty scrambled to her feet and walked to a log she'd seen before tripping.

Something crashed behind her.

"I can't find her sis."

"Henry, what are you doing?"

"I came back to look for you, and Zella sent me afterwards."

"You don't have a torch."

Henry took her hand. "I can see enough. She's not here. I know where she hides."

He led Rusty back into the brush, and halfway to where the people gathered water, and washed clothes.

"Stay," he whispered.

Rusty waited.

"Corandra, come out please," Henry said.

Leaves rustled nearby. "They don't want me. I have to go."

"Not tonight. You can't travel at night. Dover said no one can leave until we are sure there is no sickness."

"Did you come alone?"

"No. Rusty is here. She needs your help."

"I don't want to dig, or sort. I don't want anything to do with any of it, ever again!"

More leaves rustled.

"It's okay Corandra. I don't think anyone will be digging or sorting tomorrow. Stars are cloud covered. Let's go to Zella's lodge, please."

A muffled reply followed. Leaves and branches broke.

"Here Corandra, take Rusty's hand, and lead us."

The trail Corandra led them down was narrow. Bushes poked out and grabbed at hands and legs. Nothing at eye level at least. The darkness felt darker than any Rusty remembered. This trail of Corandra's didn't sparkle with stones like the main lake trail did. If she had placed any here, there wasn't enough starlight filtering through the overgrowth to make them twinkle tonight.

Back at the villa, all was silent. Henry stopped at Tanna's lodge. "I'll miss hunting for the next few days."

"Dover should let you go, if you don't go near the other villas," Rusty said.

"No," Henry said. "Almond and Tuttle will be hunting near our usual hunting grounds for a few days. We usually overlap for safety."

Rusty touched her brother's arm. "So, they depend on you to be there?"

"Not exactly. Occasionally we help each other. We look out for each other. They'll know something is wrong if we aren't there tomorrow. I'll ask to mark the isolation stones." He lowered his head, and pushed aside the entry cover.

Hunting was Henry's skill. He was so close to the animals, and so good at catching them for food, clothing, and tools. It was almost as if the animals gave themselves to him so the community could survive. Even the other hunters admired his skill. His adulthood necklace would have the teeth of his first kill, a tiger.

Rusty cared less for hunting animals, and more for hunting ancestral artifacts. Someday, she would find what she was looking for. That elusive something that would mean so much to the community. The thought of Blake's talking plastic piece was always

on her mind. Taunting her, teasing her. It was important, and Zella knew it. Nearly every day at Shelpit, she had to hold the piece, and listen to it talk. Whatever that secret was, she had to find it.

She held Corandra's hand as they passed more lodges. At the lodge she shared with Glenna, she paused. "I'm going with you," Rusty said to Corandra. Glenna would have to forgive her tonight. If Zande cried for her, she would know where to find her.

"Don't you know what Ambrena said about me, and my sponsor? Does Henry know?"

Rusty closed her eyes. "Zella told me the story once, in case I ever needed to know. I don't think Henry knows. Everyone wanted to give you a chance without a ghost hanging over your head."

"Do you think that's what it is? An evil ghost?" Corandra turned to stare at her.

Rusty took both of Corandra's hands. "We all have good and evil inside us. It's how we use both, and the power that comes with both, that matters. Occasionally, the power that comes with evil can do great things and save lives. Often, the fear of hurting anyone, or anything, that comes with the good, prevents people from standing up to bad evil."

"I've never heard of good evil." Corandra laughed.

"Sure you have. You, me, Henry, this whole villa." Rusty hugged her and laughed. She waved her arm to encompass all the lodges. "Without the evil of your sponsor, none of us would have existed."

Corandra turned to her. "He killed your mother and sponsor."

Rusty nodded, a tear on her cheek. "And he brought them together. Ambrena didn't mention that part, did she?" She pulled them toward Zella's lodge as she told the story of Orid burning original Shells, and moving the villa to the south side of Lake Kafa so they could secretly mine Klapit. The capture of her trader sponsor from Mills, she knew less about, so it was tacked on almost as an afterthought. Someday, she'd have to ask Zella for more of the story. There had to be more that she knew, since she was there at his death.

Corandra hugged her. "Have you ever been there?"

"No," Rusty said. "Neither first Shells or Mills. I don't remember second Shells. I'm not a traveler. Henry is more interested in

traveling than I am. He'll find them on one of the long-term hunts he likes to go on. Let's go to sleep before the rain comes."

Morning dawned misty and cool. Rusty rubbed the sleep out of her eyes, unsure of where she was.

Corandra snored beside her.

She wasn't like Zande, or Glenna, reaching out to hold her hand in sleep. They'd miss her this morning, almost as much as she'd miss them. It was nice to share a quiet lodge with Glenna.

Zella was by the fire, heating water for tea. "Several of the people have already been by this morning."

Rusty moved closer and sat beside Zella. She glanced back at Corandra.

Zella shook her head. "Some think we should move to Westpit now. Others think we should go back to Klapit."

Rusty closed her eyes as she took the tea Zella handed her. "This is the only villa so many know. We couldn't go now."

"No, we couldn't move with winter coming on. We could send scouts though. It might keep people's minds busy." Zella watched her and waited.

The tea was too hot to sip. Cloudy memories of her mother attacked by several roamers crowded her mind. "No Zella, I can't go to Klapit. Westpit is no better. You must leave me here, or train others for those two places."

"Many have been born, and many have died, since you last saw Klapit. You rarely visit the other villas, even Almond, the one you saved."

Images of those trips, and Corandra's mother, Uden, played before her eyes. The fear, the anger, those roamers, and what they had done to so many. Glenna never spoke of those days either. Had they hurt her? She had been afraid to ask. Even as they protected each other, they never spoke of those days, or the night of the attack on Orid and his followers. Rusty's hands shook until the tea spilled.

Zella steadied her hands. "The advice you gave Corandra last night applies to you as well. Don't be afraid to do what you would advise another."

Rusty glanced up. She didn't think anyone had heard their conversation. "I'll try. Do you think we should go to Shelpit today?"

"Take Corandra with you, and choose two people who you think could learn. We need to split the villas up anyway. They are all well over thirty people again. Perhaps enough for two new villas." Zella leaned back and glanced at Corandra.

Corandra sat up. "I don't want to go."

"You can help sort people instead of artifacts."

Zella closed the pouch where Rusty knew she kept secret projects. One she didn't want Corandra to see. Perhaps she had figured out Corandra's role; and knew what her charm should be next spring. If Corandra didn't mess up things worse than she already had.

Corandra sighed. "If I must."

Zella raised her eyebrow. "What? You want to sit here and stare at the walls all day? Go, and take Ellie with you. She needs to stretch her legs."

Rusty tried to not laugh. Zella was right. Corandra facing Shelpit and the miners again after yesterday would be difficult for her, and worse, the longer she put it off. Rusty would have to face Klapit. It had been abandoned so long, it wouldn't look the same. There might be nothing left of the horrors she had known, if the bison, camels, and horses had stampeded through the abandoned lodges. At least Zella hadn't asked her to go alone.

Chapter 7

People moved through Shells quieter than usual. Few words were spoken. Children walked instead of ran. Dogs barked less. Even the chickens pecked calmer than normal.

Ambrena watched and waited, as did everyone.

Dover and Robin recited all the old lore they could remember. Most of the stories about illness revolved around fights and battles of their ancestors. Some of the knowledge didn't seem important for this illness, like wound care. Others, told of instant onset illnesses that caused massive pain, scarring, and death, like Trapper had faced. Old tales filled the evening. They repeated them so they wouldn't be forgotten.

Restlessness settled in. People realized their lodges had not been prepared for winter. Stacked sticks and twigs towered next to the treasury. Dried thatch was outside the villa limits, and had not been cut. Fish hadn't been caught and stored along with the garden produce. Fresh meat was running out. The hunters were eager to track a herd, any herd, at this point. So far, no sign of illness out of the ordinary boredom from lack of normal activity.

The weather had been dreary and misty for days. A few people sniffled, normal enough in damp conditions. Today, even before making her morning rounds, Ambrena gathered herbs for tea. Hot tea could work wonders for sniffles. If Dover let the hunters leave soon, they'd need supplies in case of any accidents.

Corandra sat near the lodge she shared with Zella. At least she had calmed down some and joined in the work.

"Want to come with me?" Ambrena swung her collecting basket on her arm like a little girl.

"Sure." Corandra dumped the pile of grass she had been weaving on the ground.

The herb garden was near the edge of the main, long dried up garden. If there were little rain again next growing season, they'd have to move it closer to the lake. It would mean a lot of work clearing brush from rarely used areas. They'd have a late start and a weak growing season. Tame and wild nutria would also be more apt to steal from gardens next to the lake. They'd have to keep a guard nearby so they wouldn't lose food.

Corandra dug a few blackberry roots. "Dover said he might send teams out to Klapit and Westpit today. With horses of course. They won't be gone more than a day or two."

He must not be too worried then. Maybe the danger was past.

"What about the hunters?" Ambrena arranged bee balm flowers and mint leaves in her basket. She'd gather some stems later.

A dandelion stem dangled from Corandra's mouth. "It'll give them something to do, and the rest of us will be busy preparing for their return. If they go west, the other villas won't meet them."

"And no multi-villa hunt this fall." Ambrena arranged her basket on her hip, and walked toward the villa.

Corandra pulled up her basket. "I'll go with them, if they will let me."

"Do you want to learn to hunt?"

"I'm no good at anything else," Corandra said.

She had to think fast. Corandra had to be good at something. What, other than fighting with Henry? "You keep us lively. Without you, we would all lead boring lives."

Corandra laughed dryly. "Maybe boring is good, at least for most people. Hunting is the one skill I haven't tried. Ask Tanna to let me go, please."

Ambrena paused outside the villa. "What part of your cycle are you on? No woman should hunt in the few days before, during, or after."

"I intend to hunt more than half of each season!" A root dropped from Corandra's hand, and rolled along the ground.

"That's why not many women hunt. You may be gone for days during some of the hunts. You can practice."

Henry wouldn't want Corandra to join him in hunting on a regular basis. "Perhaps. Yes. Perhaps hunters who are always in, or near, the villa would be helpful. Go ask Tanna while I take the herbs to Robin to prepare." Her younger friend, so like a sister, pouted all the way back to the villa. The girl's thoughts and feelings scrawled across her drooped shoulders and scowling face.

"Tanna has to let me try." Corandra dropped her basket at Robin's feet and ran back to the lodge. Several leaves hit the ground. A breeze picked them up and scattered them around the villa.

"Something new?" Robin picked up Corandra's basket and walked into the treasury.

Ambrena nodded. "I hope Tanna says yes. Though, I don't think she is ready to go on a hunt. Corandra needs to practice and have a weapon first. Do you think Henry will want her along?" She strung up a few of the flowers to dry on the rack near the fire.

Robin chuckled. "Somehow, I think it would be okay. Something about those two reminds me of some forgotten story I should remember from the gen four grandmother's tales. Some tale of two young adults who shouldn't be together, and yet, they must. Leave your basket and I'll finish here." He took the basket from her hands.

"I need to take a little mint for Glenna. Thanks." Ambrena pulled some dried mint sprigs from the Treasury rafters.

She hurried to check three lodges with small children. At the first two, the children played outside on the damp ground. No dust would be stirred up in play today. The mothers were glad to see her, and reported no illness.

Glenna's entry was pinned open.

"Hi Glenna, how are you?"

"I'm okay. Not sure about Zande. He's coughing." Glenna stepped into the entry.

Ambrena pushed past her and settled next to the boy on his sleeping mat.

Zande's head felt a little warm. Of course, he was beside the fire. "Any other symptoms?"

A rag stained with nose fluids lay beside the boy.

"A runny nose. Nothing uncommon with the dreary weather, I suppose."

Ambrena wasn't so sure. Her friend didn't need to be worried, not yet, anyway. "Here make him some tea." She handed Glenna the dried mint leaves.

"Come on Zande, sit over here by me." Ambrena adjusted the furs around his shoulders.

Zande crawled next to her and leaned against her shoulder.

His movements seemed slower than normal. It might be nothing. Dover needed to check him. If she could catch him before he sent the teams off, it would be best.

"Zande, could you stay here, away from the fire until I come back? I promise I'll be back as soon as I find Dover. I need to make sure the teams he is sending out have fresh tea leaves before they go."

Zande nodded.

He always talked and laughed. In fact, she couldn't remember him this silent since he was born. Her throat constricted. It had been many days. Surely too long for an illness to strike now.

Glenna looked up from the fire. Worry lines formed on her forehead.

Ambrena didn't know what to say. No one was sure what that bottle had contained. Zande had been the one to hold it longest, before he broke it all over his hand.

She stood up carefully, and covered the boy.

"Wouldn't he be warmer by the fire?" Glenna stirred the simmering water.

Zande whispered something.

Ambrena didn't want Glenna to hear. It might have been the word "hot." She swallowed. "Your fire always burns warm and bright Glenna. A light to welcome us all. From the side over here, he can watch the flames dance more clearly."

A smile flickered off as fast as it flashed on. Zande coughed again.

That wasn't the cough of a cold.

Lines on his face deepened in the fire's flickering light.

Ambrena tried to control her shaking hands. She had to move slowly until out of Glenna's sight so as not to worry her. Outside, she broke into a run. Dover would be at the horse lodges with Rusty, and those leaving. Branches slapped her face as she ran along the trail to the herd lodge.

When she reached the herd lodge, she was out of breath.

Dover was alone. Several horses gone already.

"Dover, go to Glenna." She panted. Running this distance shouldn't make her out breath. It must be the worry.

He turned to her. "What is it?"

"Zande's hot, and coughing a strange way. You said he might be sick first."

Dover covered his eyes. "You left tea?"

Ambrena nodded.

"I wish we remembered what our ancestors knew." Dover touched her hand, and they rushed back to the villa.

At Glenna's lodge, they paused outside before calling for her.

Dover took a deep breath and walked in at Glenna's response.

"You forgot your basket," Glenna said.

Ambrena nodded. "So Dover had to come back with me to collect the needed tea leaves for the teams." Lying wasn't something she was good at. Omitting that the teams were already gone, she could do. After all, if the teams really needed the tea, runners could catch them.

Dover walked through the maze of Glenna and Rusty's belongings to Zande along the wall. He glanced up at Ambrena as he felt the child's forehead. A tiny nod was enough to let Ambrena know she was right.

A lump in her throat threatened tears.

"How are you feeling?" Dover asked Zande.

"Wanna sleep." He leaned up against Dover.

Dover pushed him back at arm's length. "You sleep then. Be sure and drink plenty of tea. Glenna step outside with me."

Glenna's face paled.

Ambrena waited near the entry.

Zande curled up in a tight ball, coughed, and covered his head.

"Any other symptoms, in him, or you?"

"No. Cold weather stuff. Runny fluids from the nose, eyes, and bottom. They go together. Don't they?"

"Yes. Often they do. Don't keep him too close to the fire. Find me if anything changes."

Glenna stepped in the entry.

"And don't leave him alone. I'll send someone to stay with you if you like. Rusty will be gone a few days."

The shock on Glenna's face scared Ambrena. "Do you want me to stay?"

"You have too much to do. Go. Zande and I will be fine until Rusty returns." Glenna's arms dangled by her side. She tried to pick up a dish she had been cleaning. It fell into her lap, uncleaned.

Ambrena closed her eyes. Zande was already sound asleep. Normally, he bounced around underfoot laughing, singing, and

dancing. There were no words of comfort for her friend. She touched Glenna's shoulder, picked up her basket of herbs, and hurried outside.

Her thoughts tumbled as they hurried to Tanna's lodge. "I can't do it. If you can't do anything, what is the point of my visiting them?"

"Comfort. That is all we can offer. Comfort and tea. If only." Dover squeezed her hand as his words trailed off. "Zella, you here?"

"Come in."

He opened the entry. "How is Ola?"

Furs covered the gathering baskets bench. Ambrena lifted her basket to a higher shelf and covered it, so the wind wouldn't blow the leaves away.

Zella glanced up from stringing beads for an infant naming necklace. "She's okay. A little cough and runny nose. Tanna decided to visit Shelpit, since Rusty went to Klapit."

Dover picked up the infant and checked her forehead and ears. "She has a fever too."

"Too? She's too close to the fire." Zella's hands fell to her lap. A bead rolled off onto the floor.

Dover closed his eyes and nodded. "Move her to the wall, and we'll see."

"Don't you both have more to do than watch a grandmother care for her baby granddaughter?" Zella looked from Dover to Ambrena and back.

"Zande is sick." Ambrena sank into the pile of furs next to the fire.

Another bead rolled across the floor and into the fire. Zella covered her mouth and ignored the fire devouring the day's work in the bead. "Bad?"

Ola coughed a dainty cough, not the rasping cough Zande had.

Ambrena nodded. Maybe Ola had a normal cough and would be okay.

"There's nothing we can do." Dover picked up another stray bead and covered his eyes. "Our ancestors had to know something about this illness. They knew so much. If we had kept the useful knowledge, and lost the dangerous, we'd know the answer."

"They must have been intertwined somehow. Rusty saved us once before. She can now." Zella folded the necklace and beads into a fur pouch.

Stray beads scattered on the floor, and one gone. Normally, Zella would be angry if work, and precious items, were destroyed. Unless, she thought the Goddess would be appeased by the loss of a bead.

Dover checked Ola's head and closed his eyes. "We can't let her go by herself. This illness could be anything, or nothing."

Ambrena gulped. "I could go with her when she comes back, if Zande isn't better. You know more than I do. You have to stay and take care of them."

The fire crackled. A log sputtered out. Zella and Dover looked at each other, not acknowledging Ambrena, or Ola. A secret conference, using their own private hand and eye gestures.

"No. We haven't heard from Mills, and they don't even know Rusty exists. And where else would they go? None of the Pit Miners know more than we do," Zella said.

"I wasn't thinking of Mills. Brael is trying some new herbs. She may have learned something new. They have more contact with roamers than we do. We have to try something," Dover said.

"If Jorn were here." Zella said.

Jorn had left with Uden and Fendon long ago. When they visited the Shims' villa every Spring Trade to hear about Corandra, he stayed away. He always sent a message and new furs to Zella through them.

Ola gurgled a watery newborn sound.

Staying here meant watching people she had always known become sick. Some would live. Some may die. Winter was coming, and travel couldn't occur then. A decision had to be made soon.

Tanna walked in.

A least for now, there would be no more talk of anyone leaving. Ambrena didn't want to leave, and didn't think anyone else would either.

Dover had kept everyone in the villa close, in case the potential sickness could be carried to their neighbors. Henry had set up the stones, informing travelers that something dangerous was in the villa. If he was talking about sending people out, he was really concerned.

Chapter 8

Another chance. This might be her last. Tanna had agreed that Corandra could learn to hunt. Not this hunt, of course. She had to learn to set snares, and practice throwing a spear first. At least she knew what vines from the shriveled garden would produce good snares. Henry had taught her that much the previous fall. Now, he would teach her how to braid the snares for different animals.

The garden was a dried mess. It had bloomed well early in the spring. Occasionally, there would be a second planting. It had been too dry this summer. The tubs used to water the few remaining squash plants were barely damp from the dew and mist.

Vines draped across her shoulder. Squash plants were bare and turning brown, no flowers visible. None. Way too late in the season, and it had been dry too long. Every spring and fall the garden grew and died. They replanted new growth, and sometimes cut down a few encroaching trees to add a little space.

Was she the wildwood that needed removing? Henry had always bickered with her. Often he had stood up to others when they wanted to inform Zella of their fights. If he didn't know the history of their sponsors, it was strange. If he did know, it was even stranger.

Corandra picked up a dead strand of bean plant and twirled it around. No one could understand what went on in her mind. Her mind knew the right thing to say. So often, the wrong thing came out. Rusty's challenge, to use her bad, for something good, meant she still cared about her.

The herd lodge with Ellie waiting wasn't far off. Her feet found their own way there as she thought through the last several days.

Ellie snorted a warm welcome.

She climbed on her back. Pointing her toward the villa, Corandra rode along, lost deep in thought. The path was quiet, as many were at Shelpit today, or at the lake washing clothes. Dover and Glenna stood outside her lodge.

Corandra heard his words to her.

If Zande were sick, and Dover wanted to send help to Glenna, it was all her fault for asking to dig away from the pit in the first place. Everyone would blame her if this illness killed him. Zella hadn't said

much in front of her about it. However, she had heard whispered conversations between Rusty and Ambrena. The people in the villa feared her, and the potential unknown illness.

She followed Dover and Ambrena back to Tanna's and listened to them talk. Newborn Ola might be sick too.

Corandra lowered her head. If the ghost of her sponsor was causing her to make mistakes, she'd find that ghost and have her say. There was no reason to punish Zande for her actions! She slapped Ellie on the rump and raced to Kafa Sighting.

The Kafa Goddess should take her, as she had taken Blake. Then, perhaps, everyone could live. None of the people of Shells deserved to die for her mistakes. The best way to make it right was to disappear for good. Maybe the Goddess would forgive her, and let the villa prosper once again.

She reached the watered bonfire. Only a few broken branches had been disturbed. Nutria prints were in the damp charcoal.

The lake ahead was dark, and calm. No sign of movement. She had gone in here before, and the Goddess hadn't answered. Perhaps she needed to go in on the other side. Someone might try to stop her if she went back for clothes. If the Goddess took her, she wouldn't need them anyway.

A tear slipped down her cheek. Corandra slid off of Ellie and walked down to the lake. No bugs roamed on the surface. The water was cold. Here, it tasted like mud. This wasn't the place.

She climbed back on Ellie. One glance back to the villa, and she broke a new path in the opposite direction.

Something good out of something bad. She'd find it.

"Corandra? Where are you?" Henry's voice was low, and far behind her.

She had to hurry. He mustn't know she had been here. He couldn't follow and try to save her. She wanted to save him, and the villa, where she couldn't live, ever again.

Chapter 9

The horse beneath Rusty was a three gens descendant of the Grandmother's Sandy rescued by Tanna. Gentle when working Shelpit, she pawed and sniffed the ground. All the horses sensed something was different. They hadn't worked, or been out of the herd lodge, for days.

Both pit search teams would leave this morning. Westpit would be explored by those who remembered how to find the place. Which meant they would suffer as much as she would. One of the women going to Westpit was the mother of the girl Tanna and Robin couldn't save. The woman sat tall and firm on horseback. Tears trickled down her face as she led the horse out the entry.

If the girl's mother could make the trip, so could Rusty. She held her head high, and tried to calm the horse beneath her. Out of the entry at last, she glanced back at Dover before going to the front of the group she would lead to Klapit.

The ride should be short. The residents of second Shells used to walk to Klapit daily. Third Shells, where they lived now, was out of sight of the abandoned and burnt second Shells. First Shells location was long forgotten, and several day's walk away.

She followed the Tuttle trail to the midway point, and then turned down the Almond trail for a short distance, before a rarely used track turned off alone. Rusty hoped she could remember the way. She had never dreamed of going back there for anything. And now, that was the one place she must go.

The horses jounced along.

An isolation trail marker stood tall over the Grass Sea. It would be left in place, and they hoped to meet no one, so the illness wouldn't spread. This morning, Zella had asked Dover if they could remove the markers. No sign of sickness had occurred. However, he wanted to wait, in case the illness lurked in their bodies, or the air.

Rusty didn't want to wait. To worry about her mistakes, and the consequences. She had allowed Corandra to go off by herself, and even asked her to take Zande. By taking him, she wouldn't run off and pout like she often did. Zande had been her hope Corandra

wouldn't be hurt doing something foolish. Rusty covered her eyes. It was too late to review the past. She must pay attention to the trail.

Almond trail marker loomed ahead.

Rusty stopped. She hadn't gone this way since she Gel, Kleal, and Uden had brought her and infant Henry to new Shells long ago. Perhaps that too had been a mistake. She and Henry should have faced the past long before now. Others had returned to remember what had happened, and continued on with their lives safely. If Henry hadn't been here on his own, she'd need to convince him to come with her another day.

Her three companions waited, bunched up behind her. Zella had probably told one of them to take control if she couldn't do it.

She would do it. A catch in her throat prevented her from giving the vocal turn signal. They would follow a hand signal.

No trail marker would show the way to Klapit. Those who didn't know where it was could rediscover it someday, when the ghosts of the dead were long gone. Rusty slowed the horse when she thought she was close to the path.

Brush on the right side showed recent disentanglement. A smile fluttered at her lips. Dover must have come, or sent someone, to open the path. He'd make it possible for her to complete the trip to Klapit. Her shoulders drooped. Shells could ask her to leave, since she had been the dig leader. Especially since the dig pit was now empty of useful artifacts. To remain in her villa, she'd have to prove she wouldn't make the same mistake again. And perhaps find a new skill.

"On to Klapit," her voice cracked. Her arm lowered, and she turned the horse down the track.

The opening had been clearly marked. More than a few horse lengths in, and it no longer was. She picked her way through the brush and brambles. A clearing soon spread out before her. Rusty called a halt, and a meal. Going onward would wait. Lions or bison could be about off the paths, and they'd need to listen to the environment before revealing themselves.

The horses grazed nearby while they ate.

"What do you think we will find?" Myrya asked.

Rusty glanced toward where Klapit should be. Tall grass blocked their view. "Do you remember it?"

Myrya shook her head and sat her wooden platter down. "Not really. Like you, I tried to forget. I'm older than you, I think."

"I've never been here," Imel said. "I was a roamer taken in by Almond before it happened."

"Nin?" Rusty said.

Nin stared toward their destination. "I was here. I know where the Webbel villa was, and the dig lodge." She shivered in the late fall sunshine.

If lions were around, the horses would be pawing and snorting, trying to encourage the group to leave.

Rusty took a deep breath. "Well, guess we better go. The horses aren't nervous."

Her horse settled comfortably as they walked forward.

"Nin, can you walk beside me and point the way. Finding the overgrown lodges will be difficult after all this time." The main Webbel villa had been a day's walk away. They had kept a secret small villa outpost here.

Nin rode up beside her. "There weren't many lodges. They should be over there." She pointed to where several brushy trees towered over the open space. The trees could hide many animals. Someone had even reported a troop of chimps might have made the abandoned villa their lodge once everyone moved to Shells, or the other villas. Travelers occasionally saw them, and remained quiet as they passed to not disturb them.

Her horse skittered to the side.

Rusty pulled her up and glanced back, bringing the horse around to a hissing sound from an unusual hole in the ground.

Three little heads, similar to prairie dogs, darted in and out of the hole, hissing at the horse. Laughing she pulled away. Ground cats. Almost the same as prairie dogs. They didn't share territories. Ground cat holes were more visible, and a horse, or person, would see them before stumbling into one.

As they approached the trees, they listened for the sound of chimps. Tall grass rustled as something ran for the brushy trees. Screams and squeals sounded overhead. They echoed all around.

Rusty couldn't determine where all the sounds came from.

"We have to go on, try not to spook them."

"I think they've spooked me," Myrya said.

Rusty laughed. "They are scary. Did Webbel bring them here?"

"I don't think so. I don't think Blake, or the Webbel leaders, cared much for living creatures." Nin said.

"Back east, people kept them as pets, and let them do some of the work, like harvesting in trees," Imel said.

"We can reach the tops of most trees," Rusty said.

Imel laughed. "Not back east. On the mountains, trees grow so tall, the tops are almost invisible. Everyone in Shells could stretch out in a straight line and still not be as long as a tree is tall."

Trees that tall would not be nice, or safe in stormy weather. "What could possibly grow in such a tall tree worth harvesting?"

"Leaves and branches for fires. Seeds for food and beads. Some fruit trees are taller than people. Harvesting them with helpers makes it easier, though you have to share with the animals too." Imel hooted to the chimp troop.

Sudden silence washed across the open space.

Rusty turned to him. "What did you say to them?"

"Like us, they have dialects. I tried to say, 'relax, friends.'"

The chimps threw branches and small rocks at them.

"I don't think they understood you." Rusty pulled her horse away. "Let's go on to Klapit. If they follow, maybe they'll see we mean no harm."

"They'll sure raise the alarm if lions are nearby," Myrya said.

They passed by the remains of the former secret villa. Lodges tilted to the side, wood rotted through. Birds took flight. Rodents scurried for cover. No one had wanted to take the wood or straw from here. The ghosts of the dead were sure to follow any who did. Had it been long enough for the ghosts to have found comfort and a new lodge? A scream from the chimps sounded much as Rusty would expect a ghost to sound.

Nin stopped. Tears rolled down her face.

Chimps screamed at them in the background.

"It sounds almost like those nights long ago. I never wanted to hear the screams of the dead and dying women again."

Nin turned back to the chimps. "Hush my little ones, hush, and let it be. Hush my little ones, let's sleep through the noisy."

She sniffled and clutched the horse's mane. "That's what I used to sing to the babies as men hurt their mothers. Always afraid I'd be next. What else could I do?"

The look on her face made Rusty turn away. Her own mother had been one of those women. Had Nin sang to her and Henry? She didn't dare ask. Memories of those days were far more painful than the damage Corandra had created for the villa. She lowered her head to allow Nin to compose herself.

Nin wiped her eyes and looked beyond the tattered remains in the direction of Shells.

"I should have come back before now. Alone. I'm going on. Wonder if the dig lodge is still there?" Nin attempted a weak smile and faced where Klapit may have been.

Rusty waited. The dig lodge. Her sponsor had been held captive there. Her mother had died in a field not far away. Could she face it? She gulped and took a deep breath. She sped the horse up. One way to know.

The chattering ceased behind them as they trotted on to Klapit.

They passed a large open bison hollow. The scar Zella had talked about was just beyond. Open pits, never filled. Beyond, sat the dig lodge, wooden boards hung loosely over the abandoned entry.

Rusty slid off the horse. Alone was best. If tears did slide down her cheeks, no one would know. They would see her strength, and not her fear.

Nin and Myrya grabbed her arms. "We'll go together."

Rusty's throat was too tight to tell them no.

They walked to the dig lodge.

The mostly open entry welcomed them to semi darkness. The open windsun on the other side allowed a little light in as well. In the center of the room was an open pit, with a pole tilted out toward the entry. The remains of the ladder Zella had used to bring her sponsor, and the other unknown man, out. The other man had recovered, and left long ago, still not speaking their language.

"He didn't die here," Nin said.

"No, and neither did his spirit. Mother never knew he was still alive, and he never knew she died." A tear trickled down her cheek. In the darkness, no one could see it.

"We can tear it down," Myrya said. "If you think it's best."

"No," Rusty said. "Not today. We won't stay here. Let's go see the pits, dig a little, and try to find something."

Zella had said these pits might be dug out, with next to nothing left. They had been used for gens. The pits looked empty, picked over and dusty dry. Their tools wouldn't cut through to the ground beneath. The river was too far away, and their water gourds wouldn't carry enough to loosen the ground.

Rusty leaned against her horse and stared into the open pits.

Chimps chattered nearby.

"Come on, we are going to try another location. Maybe Corandra had a good idea after all. Wish she were here instead of with Ambrena."

She led them away from the Klapit the Webbels had known.

It wouldn't be far. Ancient lore said many of these mines were larger than all of their villas put together. If there were another part of the mine they could find, it would be the best thing for all of them.

Chapter 10

Coughing children surrounded Ambrena in the Shells' treasury. They had all been brought in so Zella, Dover, Robin, and she could care for them, and their mothers. The villa had grown larger than the treasury could hold comfortably. A few adults were gone, those on the trips to Klapit and Westpit, as well as the hunters.

Stinky, runny fluids everywhere overwhelmed those who tried to keep clean cloths available for all the sick children. Warm water and tea for the sick did nothing to cover the odor of runny fluids. Coughs and sneezes played chase around the treasury. Their sufferers were laid waste. Dogs stayed away, and didn't come in to play. Even the mice didn't come in, as there was no food.

Something had to be done. Mothers and sponsors began to despair of their children being healthy again. The youngest ones were the sickest. Awake enough to cough and drink a little tea, then slip back into a restless, fevered doze. At least Corandra was safe with Rusty, and couldn't see what had happened.

Ambrena wiped Zande's fevered head.

Glenna cried and wrung her hands.

Rusty wasn't here to watch the boy suffer. There was no hope for him. While bringing them all together made care easier, sometimes, it made the sickest sicker. She walked over to Robin.

"Is anyone still in their own lodge?"

Robin helped another child drink warm tea. "I don't think so."

"We have to take the mothers outside. They are coughing too. Fresh air would do us all good," Ambrena said.

"And lodges need to be readied for winter." Robin looked up. "Do you think anyone would try?"

"It would keep people busy, and we could take the kids out in the sunshine. Sometimes, sunshine helps. Even if it is cold." Ambrena clung to the hope that Robin would agree with her.

"Tell Zella," he said. "Let her arrange it."

Someday it might be her arranging treatment of the sick. Tanna had been her age when Jorn handed her the leadership. Robin and Tanna were co-leaders. She didn't want full leadership. Some things she could be in charge of, like caring for the sick, and let Tanna pass the leadership to her own daughter, Pamma.

Zella sat in the sun and breathed the fresh air. Her hands were limp in her lap, and eyes stared far ahead.

Squatting beside her, Ambrena waited on her to acknowledge her. When no response came, she spoke. "We need to prepare the lodges for winter, and take the children out in the sunshine, away from the smoky fires." Ambrena wrung her hands, waiting on the imposing Zella.

The grandmother healer of Shells nodded. "I know. I'm worried about Tanna and Ola. She wants to send Pamma and Garn away before they become sick. If they aren't already sick, and good at hiding it."

Zella stood up. "If Corandra were here, I wouldn't be able to stop her from sending them with her to somewhere else."

Once inside, Zella's words brought a ray of sunshine into an otherwise dreary place. People were afraid to leave their children. Their hope lay in taking the children outside to recover, while they prepared for a cold and snowy winter.

Glenna's eyes did not look hopeful.

The night passed with children coughing all around.

Zande coughed and sneezed. After one particularly bad coughing spell, he screamed.

Robin ran over to him.

"Please, let me take him to my lodge to die," Glenna begged.

Dover held her close. "Shells has been through so much to reach where we are today. We will make it through this together, somehow."

Glenna held Zande close.

As morning dawned, adults carried their children out of the building and placed them where the sun would reach their weary, fevered faces. Several cried out as they were moved from the nest like places they had formed in the thick furs on the ground. At last, all the children were together outside.

"Ambrena, go and bring back water with the men. We are going to scrub the treasury down today while we can." Zella rushed about smoothing blankets and children.

Mothers reluctantly brushed their fevered brows and walked to the lake.

At least there was plenty of work to do while they waited to see what the Goddess Kafa decided. Ambrena grabbed a bucket.

The people walked to the main beach they used for swimming and washing clothes. It would be crowded with sad faces. As much as they needed a break, so did she. The turn off to Kafa Sighting wasn't far away. If she hurried, she could have some peace and quiet without the wailing of mothers who feared for their children's lives.

The drenched bonfire circle glistened as the light filtered in among the branches. The lake appeared calm, with tiny surface ripples. Ambrena walked to the water's edge and filled her bucket. Standing tall, she held her hand over her eyes and glanced out over the water. Nothing in sight.

She turned and almost dropped the bucket. There in the sand were footprints. They weren't hers. Camel footprints ran alongside the human ones. They blended together, and disappeared in the leafy underbrush.

They could only belong to Corandra and Ellie. Where had she gone and why?

If she wasn't with Rusty, where was she?

Forgetting the bucket, she ran all the way back to the villa and skidded to a stop in front of Tanna and Robin.

As soon as her tale was out, Robin told her to lead the way.

He measured the footprints and followed them into the brush where they disappeared among the leaves.

"It's been several days. Where can she be?" Ambrena trembled. Her neglect of keeping track of Corandra would lead to more trouble.

"Alone and scared. We have no one to send looking for her. Where is Henry?" Robin moved a few leaves eyeing the prints on the beach.

"He left to go hunting the same day as Rusty, and the Westpit group left. I hope he finds her." Ambrena closed her eyes. Why did she do this to me, and all of us?

Robin glanced in the direction it appeared she had gone. "I hope so. Until then, there is nothing we can do. Our group is too fractured as it is."

He looked out over the lake. "Fill the bucket and wait. I'm going to follow her a little ways. Then we have to return to the villa."

Ambrena grabbed her full water bucket. Corandra was always in trouble. What would it take for her to learn to be part of the group, and not outside of it?

Robin returned. "I think she's going on around the lake. Maybe she met the Westpit group. All we can do is hope. Let's go. I'll carry the water."

Ambrena handed him the bucket and picked up a few sticks as they walked back. After cleaning the community lodge today, she'd have to gather firewood. Or send her not quite gen two friends to do so.

The day went as smoothly as it could. Many lodges had a coat of mud and twigs added to protect against winter winds and snows. Three were given a new thatch roof, with many more to be completed. There'd be more work to do tomorrow, while waiting on the hunters and the search teams to return.

The hunters returned late that night, with a captive zebra for meat. It didn't take them long to butcher it, and cut the meat into strips to dry on the racks.

Ambrena worked on cutting up the meat Henry had brought her.

"Henry did you see Corandra?" Ambrena asked.

His eyes clouded up. "I think so. I've followed her so often. She always comes safely back to the lodge, and I had to hurry. I never thought she wouldn't come back. I figured she needed to be alone."

Children coughed behind them.

Ambrena nodded. She helped cut the meat and hang it to dry around the sides of the treasury. What more could they do?

"I'll look for her tomorrow."

"You can't go alone. No one can be spared." Ambrena's knife sliced off more than she meant it to.

"I'll take two of Tanna's dogs and not go far. I promise. If they can track her, we'll find her." Henry's hand covered hers.

Morning dawned with the children coughing more and more. Many cried out now when they coughed.

Henry took the dogs to search for Corandra.

Ambrena sat in a corner and rocked. The treasury was full. Adults moved around trying to comfort crying children amid the

smoky fires. No one wanted to work on their own lodges. Tanna and Ola were nowhere to be seen. It brought back memories of another treasury filled with smoke, and her mother. "Mother, I need you!"

Zella came to her side and held her.

Ambrena cried on her shoulder, sure every adult and child stared at her. The one telling them what to do, crying for a mother who had been dead so long, she couldn't remember what she looked like.

The entry panel opened. Henry walked in and shook his head. "Ellie's footprints went into the water on down a ways. I couldn't find where they came out again."

Ambrena felt as if a cloud had settled on her. She would heat water for tea, comfort a coughing child, or a crying mother. What she said, she didn't know. Stumbling along, she worked at what she had thought she was skilled to do, and now wondered if she could continue. The memories of that fiery blaze and the screams echoed no matter which way she turned.

The entry opened again, and Rusty appeared, surrounded by sunshine. How dare the sun shine in on so much misery.

"Come on Ambrena, I have news." Rusty held something in her hands.

Ambrena ran to her. "Have you seen Corandra?"

Rusty's brow wrinkled. "No. She's with you."

Ambrena shook her head.

Henry and Zella hurried to the entry.

"Let's go outside," Zella said.

Rusty sat beside the building. "It was a tough journey. Dover was right. I had to do it. Anyway, we found things, not at the Klapit we knew, further on." She opened the cloth in her hand. Metal pieces, two good enough for digging, and plastic. Tiny pegs that could be used to help stretch furs, or in weaving looms.

"There's more. We don't really need a lot this season. Enough for tools to garden next spring. Maybe we can bring the sheet I found, and separate it out into tools," Rusty said.

"You did cover it back up, right?" Zella said.

"Of course. We even sat rocks on it, so the chimps won't dig it out again. I have to say; I really don't want them for neighbors."

A high-pitched laugh startled Ambrena. She realized it was her own, covered her mouth, and lowered her eyes.

Rusty shivered.

"I think you need some tea. Don't take it so hard on yourself Ambrena. You've done all you could." Zella held out her hand to Ambrena.

"She could be with the other group, right?"

Zella nodded. "She could be."

"Corandra's like me, not a gen two adult, and doesn't know what she's doing," Henry said. "I don't want her gone. Who will I fight with if she leaves?"

Several days dragged on. As the children became sicker, the treasury lodge reeked of vomit, urine, and bowels. No matter the weather, they all had to go outside every day to clean as best they could. It wasn't enough.

Zande coughed and screamed again.

Rusty ran to hold him. Beside her, Glenna rocked and cried.

It wasn't fair to her. Ambrena knew Rusty felt guilty for this whole illness. One of the reasons Dover had sent her away, was his hope it would be over before her return.

Zande screamed again and again. Blood ran out of his nose, mouth, and eyes.

Rusty held him close while Glenna cried beside them. They rocked and crooned, patting his back, and trying to ease his suffering.

Ambrena put her hand against his forehead. It had been burning hot. Now it cooled. "Zella, Dover, come quick." It was too late, and she knew it.

The child had died in Rusty's arms.

Rusty's tears mingled with the blood from his eyes, nose, and mouth.

Dover left to make tea, while Zella tried to comfort them.

There was no comfort. Their lives had been shattered once again. Some would live. All would carry the hurt and fear within them. How many would die?

She ran out of the building and down to Kafa Sighting. At the edge of the lake, she fell to her knees and cried.

Chapter 11

Henry's voice dissipated as Corandra rode Ellie along the lake's edge. Their footprints would be easily tracked if he followed them. At an open beach, she urged Ellie into the water.

Ellie snorted and side stepped. She had no problem stepping into the water to pull something out, or to drink. Going fully in, was another matter.

Corandra urged her on. If Ellie would walk in the water, a body's length out, her footprints would wash away. No one could follow, and the villa of Shells would survive without her there causing problems.

Weeds and underwater plants grabbed at Ellie's legs. Tiny fish swarmed as well, plucking bugs off her fur. Nearby, wild nutria played on the bank and the water's edge. They stopped and stared at her. One whisked under the water, and deep into a hollow tree.

Tame nutria lived on the other side of the washing and swimming area. These wild ones were rarely hunted, as their skins were less soft, and their meat far leaner than the ones the community fed regularly. Except this dry season. This season, there had barely been enough food for the people. None had been spared for the animals, who could gather their own.

Zella's nutria stew. The thought made her mouth water with anticipation. No matter how tough, dry, and thin the wild nutria, Zella could make it all taste delicious. Never again, would the tasty stew cross her lips.

Her stomach rumbled. Last night's meal seemed days in the past. When she reached somewhere far away, she would hang a snare to catch one, and try her luck cooking. She had the dried garden vines with her.

No point in dreaming. Corandra urged Ellie onward. Once she was far away from the villa she'd practice her meager hunting, foraging, and cooking skills. It couldn't be too hard. Her mother hadn't been much older than her when she had to rely on herself.

Ellie splashed around a bend in the lake. They could climb out soon, and would need to, if they didn't want to risk plunging into the

deeper waters that crept closer. A walk through shallow water would keep Corandra dry. Deeper water would mean a cold swim.

Ellie scrambled up a bank and shook herself dry.

Corandra held her arm up to keep the dirty water from her eyes. She had never been near this part of the lake. Roamers had not been known to come from this direction. No one ever came here, other than maybe hunters. There had to be people out west. First Shells had once been far to the south and west.

Trees and brush cleared as Ellie walked through. Dried berries clung to a few bushes. A good place to rest and eat.

Slinging her leg over, she slid off onto the ground. The berries were overripe, and fiery ants covered a smaller bush nearby. She grabbed what she could, and backed into the clearing while Ellie nibbled at the grass.

Once, long ago, Zella had mentioned a place she and Dover had explored with Calen long before. They had found paper with pictures and words. There might have been more. Corandra had seen the paper once, from where Zella kept her buried stash of artifacts. Colorful pages had crumbled when her hands touched them.

Perhaps if she found the place Zella had found, there might be more paper. Maybe even something to help the sick children. She had to try. Now which direction could it be?

Ellie shifted restlessly.

Corandra hurried back to Ellie. Patting her, she climbed on.

The camel trotted across the open plain.

A lion jogged in their direction.

Ellie wheeled about and ran northeast.

Corandra held on tight, barely breathing.

They passed the lion.

He slowed to a trot toward Lake Kafa.

She glanced back, and didn't see the lion at all.

The Grass Sea easily hid lions and tigers.

Once they reached more brush and tiny trees, Ellie slowed down.

Zella was nowhere near to guide her. All sense of direction was gone. Nearing midday, they reached dense undergrowth, with a small animal path leading deep inside. Shade would be refreshing

from the midday sun. She took a deep breath and nudged Ellie toward the path.

Ellie trudged along the path. Branches whipped Corandra in the face. Before long, they reached another lake. Or was it a section of Lake Kafa she didn't know? Ellie gulped the water.

Corandra dropped down and drank a little. It tasted different from the water she knew. Not bad, or potentially dangerous. A good sign. Nearby, berry bushes held a few last berries, and roots undisturbed by human hands would make a quick snack.

Soon, they left the lake, walking further northeast. The direction was clearer now. Something about it felt right. Birds flew overhead. Perhaps people lived in that direction.

There had been talk long ago of Mills, a place where people had retained some of the ancient's knowledge. They might take her in, and maybe even be able to help the sick children of Shells. If she could find it. No one had ever searched for it. Though Tanna and Robin had once said they would.

Ellie led the way through the thick brush and back into the open plains. Bits of broken rock littered the region, as if a giant had scattered large white and red stones among the arid ground.

Bison grazed in the distance, with one lone guard watching in her direction. Bison didn't see well from a distance. They'd see a camel and not be disturbed.

Corandra could bend low and hide.

Ellie led her through the tall grass.

By late afternoon, they had passed the bison, and reached another pile of white and red rock scattered among the brush. Corandra pushed her way through. This would be her first night spent outside. Though she knew that once, long ago, she had been alone on the trail. As an infant no less, in her mother's arms. If only her mother were here to hold her now.

And feed her. Her stomach growled from a lack of sustaining food. Berries and roots weren't enough for long marches. She'd have to try to snare a rabbit, or nutria, if one were around.

The clearing didn't have many vines, unlike at Shells where the hunters cultivated them for snares. The few she had would have to do. If she did catch an animal, there was no fire, or any fire making tools in her tunic. She sat down and stared at the ground. The one

lodge she had ever known was a day or more travel away. No food, blanket, shelter, company, and no fire to protect herself from wild animals.

Food wouldn't appear in her hand. She picked up a rock and scraped at a boulder. Soon, the edge was sharp enough to dig out a few roots. After eating, she did her best to set a snare by the riverbank. If the animals here didn't know people, her smell wouldn't disturb them. A pile of leaves would make a temporary bed, until she decided if she was staying here, or leaving in the morning. With a bush on one side, and Ellie on the other, she should be safe.

The next morning, Corandra looked around. Hard to imagine it had been a full day since she had spoken to anyone.

"Ellie it's too quiet. Where shall we go today?"

Ellie snorted and walked out to the Grass Sea to graze. At least she was easily fed.

Moss covered many of the nearby tumbled rocks, causing her to slip and slide through the vegetation. Dandelions, a few cattails near the stream, and black walnuts. Not enough to provide energy to dig for long. Paper would be deep in the ground, and require lots of energy to dig out. Maybe she could bring Rusty here, if this was the right place. She gathered leaves and nuts, and checked her snare. Snapped in half, it dangled from the brush.

Corandra ate and wove another snare. Once it was set, she walked further into brush and searched for a suitable dig location. Rusty had tried to teach her what to look for. Somehow, nothing here looked at all like Shelpit. A flat rock would be a good spot for a fire later on, if she could make one.

She gathered sticks and moss, and left them on the flat stone to dry. Nearby, was a hollow big enough to dig without rocks scraping her knees. Nothing stuck out of the ground. Any paper near the top would have rotted away gens ago. With a sharp rock, she dug down as deep as she could into the soil.

Birds twittered and sang around her. One hopped down on the ground and dug out a worm. If she could dig as easily as the bird, she'd have found something by now. The rock could only dig so deep. Where the worm had dug its way out, she tried again.

Curious rabbits cheered her on, while the birds chattered overhead. Ellie returned to nap nearby. The deeper she dug, the more she felt she was doing something important. There had to be a solution somewhere. Zella always said the ancients left them information, hidden in the deep places that they would find when they needed it most.

She would find those things, whatever they were, that Zella had looked for all her life. Maybe the children could be saved. Perhaps, even her arguing with Henry, and the others, would be in the past. The adults might take her on a trading trip, and she could find a new lodge. With a resolve she had never known, she pushed the rock deeper into the ground.

Nothing found, she walked back to her snare. If this were the place Zella had found, maybe the paper she had brought back was all that had been left here. The ground near the stream wasn't dry, like most of Shelpit, where they found the most useful objects. Further away from the stream, closer to the drier rocks, would be a better place to search. With no bucket or large gourds to transport water, digging in dry ground with a sharp rock would be far more difficult.

The snare had caught nothing. Still hungry, she walked to the flat stone and sat. Shells had always listened for the Kafa Goddess. Sometimes, though, Zella, Tanna, Robin, and Dover mentioned the Goddess Amber. Amber was the Goddess Ambrena had been named for, and the one all the other Pit Miners listened for. How had Zella said to try to speak to the Goddess Amber? It was different from Goddess Kafa. Sun and light, rather than water and stream.

Zella had said something once when Corandra had been so angry she could see her own red nose. Maybe she could remember it, if she tried. She glanced around.

Ellie dozed nearby.

Corandra closed her eyes, and tried to picture what Goddess Amber must have been like. An image of clouds and lines was all she saw. The lines made no sense, they wandered here and there, much like rivers and streams on the ground. Dark spots, like boulders clustered near several.

A cry startled her.

The swinging snare had caught a rabbit. Roasting it would take most of the day. The rabbit struggled as she tried to wring its neck. Henry always skinned the rabbits before he brought them to Zella. She missed teasing Henry that she was practicing. He always laughed and told her she wouldn't succeed at hunting.

No one to laugh with her today, or to help with the work. She skinned the rabbit with a sharp stone. Her cuts with the rock were poor, and damaged the skin. It had been a beautiful sandy color. Sweat rolled into her eyes.

After she prepared the rabbit to roast, she had to start a fire on her own. Dover made fire building look easy. She'd have to be careful, it was so dry here, a fire could burn easily once started, and she wouldn't be able to escape in the Grass Sea, even on Ellie.

While the rabbit roasted, she dug nearby. Halfhearted at best. Being alone didn't seem so fun anymore. Going off on her own everyday had always been her goal. Now, with only Ellie and wild animals for comfort, she missed those she knew most. There had to be answers from the ancients here. Maybe more paper or even the clay tablets Zella's mother had taken with her. Whatever it was, she'd know when she found it.

Days passed. They all felt the same. Snare, dig, eat, and repeat. The rabbits that had come close before shied away. Except one who had become like a friend, snuggling up next to her at night. She must have been an outcast too.

Sunlight filtered through denser underbrush. Corandra had dug here the day before, and the ground felt different. Oddly familiar. She dug deeper, and her bladed rock finally struck something other than dirt, rock, or twig.

Her hands dug into the ground, and uncovered a red container. Corandra gasped. Not another one!

The top looked different though. It was smoother, and didn't have metal rods on it. She dug out around it, almost afraid to touch it. By midafternoon, she pulled it out of the ground.

Zella had said it wasn't the box, or even the contents, that made the sickness. It was what was inside the smaller bottles. She took a deep breath and tried to think what the Goddesses Amber and Kafa

would want her to do. She had never cared before. Now, it mattered.

There seemed to be no answer.

One more deep breath; and she lifted the lid.

Inside were piles of paper.

Corandra squealed with delight. She turned to share the find, and realized even Ellie wasn't in sight. Her shoulders slumped, and shadows crossed the ground in front of her.

The lid dropped hollowly. Somehow, she had to carry this container to Zella. At least a day's walk back to Shells. It would have to wait until tomorrow. In the meantime, what could all those pages be? She had to save them, and not let them crumble to dust before they reached Zella.

Corandra carefully placed the lid on the container, and covered it with leaves. It would take the rest of the day to make a harness for Ellie to wear to carry the paper container back.

Two branches would make the rails. Several small trees looked like they would do the job, if her rock could manage to break them off. After chopping at one for a while, she turned to branches on the ground. Hopefully, two were strong enough.

The trail would lead over high rocks, and the container wasn't light. She gathered many more branches and wove a basket to dangle between them. More branches were woven into the two rails as high up as she dared.

Even so, Ellie might balk. She rarely pulled loads.

Corandra laughed. Ellie was about the same age as her, not a child anymore, and not really an adult, either. That strange in between place, that older adults said should be so freeing. For those living through it, it was a nightmare of trying to be responsible so adults would accept you, while missing the fun and games of previous seasons, and younger friends. Or friends like Rusty and Ambrena who had given up childish games for adulthood. Definitely not relaxing.

The last few twigs fell from her hands. This being alone with the animals for quiet, away from the gossiping villa relaxed her for a while. It wasn't the way she wanted to live. Returning tomorrow would be so nice. A few days to say goodbye, before she travelled

to a new lodge. Maybe the Webbel villa would take her in. She was part of them, after all.

Or, her sponsor had been.

Children generally stayed with their mothers, whom they could be sure of. Every man accepted that he might have sponsored many children. They only cared that a child existed, not who might have helped it come into being. If she couldn't straighten her own life out, no man would be interested in sponsoring her child. She'd be ignored and have to resort to begging if she wanted a baby of her own. Beneath any woman's dignity.

Morning dawned, misty and chilled. Another reason to go back to the lodge. She had no winter clothes.

"Come on Ellie."

Ellie sniffed the harness and shook her head.

Corandra laced it up on Ellie as best she could. At last, she tugged and pulled the container full of paper over, and onto the basket. She lashed it down with braided cattails. Dampness and critters would destroy it quickly. If it stayed shut, the papers would last.

"We have to go to Shells. If they'll have us." Corandra grabbed a long stick to use to prod the basket out of holes, and followed Ellie into the Grass Sea. Ellie wasn't used to the weight of a basket, and couldn't drag it and carry Corandra too, not for the distance required.

The early morning sun streamed down on them. Small animals moved out of their way in the tall grass. No sign of lions, so far. Movement in the tall Grass Sea ahead was barely visible to Corandra. As they drew near, Ellie sped up.

Several wild grazing camels lifted their heads. One trotted toward them and bellowed.

Ellie shook her harness and made a strange sound back at it.

"Come on Ellie, not now!" Corandra tried to direct Ellie away.

Today was not the day for Ellie to decide she was an adult camel.

The male camel kept coming toward them.

Corandra waved the stick at him.

He stopped at a distance and waited.

"Come on Ellie, let's find Shells," Corandra said.

Ellie stared at the male camel, and then turned away.

They had walked a good distance when the male thundered after them.

Ellie broke the harness and ran toward him.

The basket fell. At least her lashings had kept the lid on the container. She could weave a new rope with the tall grass. Rather than watch her friend, she pulled grass and wove a new harness.

Before long, Ellie came back. Dampness and a strange odor clung around her.

Corandra shook her head. "We have to find Shells. There are three male camels there."

Ellie shook her head as Corandra attached the new harness.

At least Ellie had come back. She didn't want to live with strangers any more than Corandra did. Maybe she could learn to live with the Shells community, if she could learn to control her fighting instinct.

It was almost dark when they reached the brushy line. They wouldn't make it to Shells tonight.

Morning broke in a new camp. Her stomach growled after an unsatisfying meal of water. Corandra hooked Ellie up again. They might make it to Shells for the midday meal, if they hurried.

It felt as if the journey would never end. The container bounced, as the basket branches wore out, and slowly unwove. If they didn't make it soon, she'd have to rebuild it with new ones. What if Ellie wasn't going in the right direction? They could be lost far from any villa.

Corandra gulped and tried to find something familiar. Everything felt familiar, while different. As if seeing it from a dream she had dreamed while awake.

Ellie snorted and ran to the camel and horse herd lodge. She had found Shells!

Corandra looked over the wall. All the animals were here waiting. They looked hungry and raced in circles as if they hadn't been outside the herd lodge since she had left.

No. Two were missing. And only two.

Shelpit was silent. No singing or gossiping voices carried on the breeze.

Had she come back too late?

She pushed Ellie on to the villa.

The path was empty. A strange crooning sound overtook her. Someone, or everyone, mourned.

She stopped Ellie at Zella's lodge, and dragged the basket inside.

Back outside she followed the sound. At the treasury, she heard voices.

"Go, and be careful," Zella said. "Brael will have herbs to help Tanna. I am worried about her."

"I hope someone at Shims' villa knows the answer to this sickness," Dover said. "If they don't, you'll have to ask Brix to help you try to find Jorn, Uden, and Fendon."

"We'll try," Rusty said. "I won't let Ambrena go alone."

"Going now, we may find an answer. I hope Corandra returns soon," Ambrena said.

A horse snorted and pawed the ground.

"Henry, and some of the hunters, will look for her tomorrow, if she doesn't," Dover said. "Now go."

Horse hooves took off down the path.

They shouldn't go alone. She had learned that much.

Corandra jumped on Ellie's back, and steered her around the treasury. "Follow them the back way," she whispered.

Once the pair were far enough away, she'd let them know she had followed. Maybe, they would really want her with them. And if not, maybe they were going somewhere she could stay.

Chapter 12

Rusty urged her horse through Shells.

Dogs and chickens slept against the lodges.

Glenna still crooned over the death of Zande.

Birds had left the villa for now. The mist of days before was gone. Dust billowed under the horse's feet.

Henry would be waiting at the herd lodge.

Rusty didn't dare tell even him she was glad to be leaving. She blamed herself for Zande's death, and Corandra's disappearance. Glenna would blame her too, before long, if she didn't already. Perhaps, if they had to find Jorn, Uden, and Fendon, it would be better to stay and not come back. An exchange of people. Villas did that occasionally.

Henry should come along. She had promised her mother to never leave him behind. He was almost an adult now, and didn't want to leave the only villa he could remember. Somehow, she thought that wasn't all. He worried about Corandra almost as much as Rusty worried about him. What a mixed up mess it was.

Horses neighed in greeting as she and Ambrena approached the herd lodge.

"Henry, ya here?" They often slipped into an unusual speech when alone together, which others looked askance at. Zella had smiled at them, much as she smiled at a pair of twins who also had private words.

"Ya, I'm here," Henry stepped out of the brush pile. "Wait. I've something to tell ya."

"Go on to the garden," Rusty said to Ambrena. "I'll be there soon."

Ambrena nodded and led her horse onward.

Henry's eyes lit up as soon as she was out of sight.

"I saw Corandra. She and Ellie came back dragging a container. I didn't dare follow her into the villa." Henry smiled. "It's good for her to be back. I wish you wouldn't go."

"You can come now if you want to. Let Zella know." Rusty really hoped he would. It would be good for him to be around other people, even if she feared and welcomed leaving.

"No. Have to make sure she is safe. And wonder what she found." Henry ran off down the path toward the villa. "Stay safe. Good luck, sis! Bring back hope and health."

Rusty smiled, and urged her horse on. Henry was so close to being an adult in many ways. So young in others.

The desolate garden looked far worse than any fall garden she could remember. Ambrena waited for her, near some brushy trees they had planted for shade long ago.

"What do you think we will find?" Rusty adjusted her gatherboard on the horse's back.

"Nothing, at first. Should we stay at Tuttle, or Shims, tonight?"

Either could help them. "We can make it to Tuttle by midday, and then to Shims by night. Quan may not know anything, though some of the hunters may have an idea which direction to go." Rusty led them down the track.

The brush-covered trail to Tuttle was overgrown without the trail caretakers cleaning it out. Animals had tracked more brush across the trail than growth, or wind, would do alone. A half-eaten squirrel lay at the bottom of the isolation marker.

No one had been through since the Klapit and Westpit searchers. Perhaps the illness hadn't come from the red container. Or, the other villas could be sick and staying close to their villas too. That was one reason they were going. The total silence. Normally, trade items would be left at the isolation stone after a few days.

The squirrel wouldn't have been left behind at the stone by another villa. Though, a larger animal may have stolen anything small someone left behind. Unless it was a warning of some other sort. They couldn't turn back and ask Dover now.

Rusty urged the horse on to a fast trot.

She slowed to glance down the trail to Almond. No sign of horses or people passing through in the last few days.

Ambrena trailed behind. While younger, she frequently visited the other villas with Tanna and Robin. Many ideas had been exchanged among them, and visits outside of Spring and Fall Trades had flourished.

Robin would take the items Rusty and Zella found in Shelpit to trade for Tuttle cloth, and Webbel tools. They arranged for the trades now held at Lake Kafa where Almond would share music,

and Lava would recite the tales of old, all of which Zella and Tanna knew. Dover often went along to visit his sister Brael at Shims, to find if any newly discovered plants had healing powers.

Rusty preferred to stay with Tanna and Robin when Zella travelled. Even going to see her friends in Almond wasn't something she could face. At first, she claimed she had to stay with baby Henry. As he grew, people gave up asking her to travel. She never made the effort. The thought of traveling, and stumbling upon the horrors of her childhood, made her heart hurt even now.

Glenna and Yananda had come to Shells to stay a few seasons before. They said the villa of Almond had too many bad memories. Now, would Glenna go back, or ask Rusty to leave? She would have nowhere to go that she had ever been.

One more reason to visit Tuttle. People there would know if anything was wrong in the other villas. They would return to Shells if Tuttle and Shims were sick as well.

Before long the cow lodge before Tuttle appeared. Cows mooed a welcome.

Rusty urged her horse on to the villa.

Smoke steamed from many of the small wooden lodges. No voices, and no one in sight. Nala, now the leader, would expect them to stop there first.

Outside of Nala's lodge, a dog yawned at Rusty. She slid off her horse and ran to knock beside the entry.

"Come in," Nala said.

Rusty pushed the entry aside and stepped into the dim interior.

Nala and Dan were eating, with three young children beside them.

Ambrena came in behind her.

Dan looked up and waved to an empty spot. "Join us? I can leave after I eat if you need to talk to Nala."

"Stay." Rusty drank tea and nibbled a piece of nutria jerky. Questions could wait until the children were finished.

The children chattered as they ate, and then went to their nap spots to rest.

Nala poked at the fire. "There is illness in Shells."

"We don't know what it is. At first, we hoped it was normal fall sickness. Now, Zande has died, and it's all my fault." Rusty covered her eyes.

Ambrena took her hand. "It's no more your fault than anyone else's. Is anyone here sick?"

"No. If Dover couldn't help, we don't know what to do. We are all staying close to Tuttle. Fall food and lodge repair gathering is about done anyway. Has Dover determined if the Fall Trade will occur soon?" Nala asked.

"We're not going back," Rusty said.

The youngest girl rolled closer to the fire.

Nala patted the girl's shoulder. "Why not?"

Rusty's hands squirmed so much she wanted to hide them.

"Zande died a terrible death, like nothing Dover has ever seen. And others, mostly children, are extremely sick."

"Not the adults?" Nala gathered the dishes.

"That's part of the problem, we don't know. Some are coughing and sneezing. It may be from the smoke, and living together in the treasury." Ambrena said. "We are going to Shims as soon as we leave here. Any ideas of where we might go for help? There is hope Jorn, Uden, and Fendon may have answers, if anyone knows where they are. We have to save the children, or Shells will die."

Dan turned away. "And you come here. My past has brought this trouble."

"Hardly yours. Rusty blames herself. Corandra does too, and she ran away, and then returned. It's no one's fault. We have to work together to save the Pit Miners." Ambrena sat her cup down.

"Dan, you've known roamers. Please help us." Rusty said.

He hid his face in his hands. "I don't want to remember. Rusty, I still remember your mother, and your sponsor."

Rusty grabbed his hand away from his face. "Then you have to tell me. Help me, as you helped Nala back then."

She glanced at Nala and blushed. "Maybe not the same."

"I would if I could. Roamers mostly come from the north, or east. I never really talked to any to know them, or where they came from. I'm sorry. I was your age then, barely an adult."

Rusty closed her eyes. Opening them, she stared at Dan.

"Where did my sponsor come from? Would Mills know anything?"

"I don't know. The silent friend he had with him left the spring after he recovered. He never spoke that I know of." Dan pulled himself up and walked to a box in a corner.

"You must know something."

Ambrena grabbed her arm. "Don't go after him. He may have forgotten anything, if he ever did know it."

"How could he forget?"

Ambrena pulled her arm closer. "Do you remember every detail of those days?"

"No. I was a child."

"And as much a leader as Robin and Tanna are today. I've studied the ways of the mind, and the tricks it can play. Don't force a memory that may not be fully true."

"It's my fault Zande went with Corandra when she found the red box," Rusty tried to pull her arm away.

"And Corandra's fault she behaves the way she does. Everyone has tried to help her."

"And now they shun her," Rusty said. "I guess I did to."

Dan placed a fur wrapped item in Rusty's hand. "I think she always knew who she was. Abandoned by her mother, many unintentionally shunned her. Or were careful what they said, and how they acted, around her."

"I never!" Rusty said.

Dan shook his head. "Not intentionally. And maybe not even until her behavior became a problem. However, I've seen the looks. I know them well. I receive them regularly, even from those I have become close to."

Rusty couldn't believe it.

Ambrena nodded. "I've seen it too. I'm too young to know if those looks occurred before her bad behavior."

The young girl wiggled in her sleep again.

Nala comforted her. "I think they may have. It was never intentional. She was a burden, a nursing baby added to the few nursing mothers who survived the battle."

"Her mother nursed her and Henry." Rusty stared at the bundle.

"Uden felt sorry for Henry even then. She blamed herself for his troubles. She told me so once," Nala said.

Rusty opened the fur. Inside was a square wooden object, with four joined wings on one end. She held it close. Something was almost familiar about it. "What is it?"

"Something from Mills," Dan said. "I hid it safe for Henry someday. You may need it now."

"Thanks." Rusty stared at the piece of wood. Somehow, it held promise and hope for the future of Shells.

"We better be going if we are going to reach Shims before dark," Ambrena said.

"Thanks Dan," Rusty said. "Nala, I hope you aren't angry we brought up the past."

Nala laughed, not her usual silvery tinkle. "Sometimes we have to. I hope the past leads you to a brighter future."

Rusty followed Ambrena out the entry. If hope lay to the northeast, they might have a long trip.

People stirred outside, as naps finished, and the chilling sunshine begged them to come out before the cold of winter.

She followed behind Ambrena, not eager to speak to anyone. Thoughts and memories swirled. Many she was sure were true. Others might only be only half-true, constructions of memory and suggestion as Ambrena had mentioned.

Chapter 13

Ambrena steadied her horse and swung up carefully. It wouldn't do to be careless as they left. She checked to be sure Rusty followed, and turned towards Shims.

Dan wasn't hiding anything, other than pain. Of that, she was sure. His face had been clear while he spoke.

Perhaps they needed to visit the Webbel villa. Someone there might know something. The smallest villa of the six, most people avoided them, often even at trades.

Zella used to journey to visit Calen before her leg twisted a few seasons before. Webbel came to Spring and Fall Trades, and traded with the other villas who visited them. Otherwise, they rarely left their villa and surrounding hunting area.

Shims was closest to Webbel. Perhaps, Quan would know more. And, it would be a good opportunity to pick up a few more supplies for traversing the unknown lands in search of Jorn.

Ambrena urged her horse faster down the trail.

Birds fluttered away noisily.

The monkey troop howled nearby, and threw empty nutshells at them.

Her horse slowed as it approached the river. It neighed, reared, and turned to wheel away.

Ambrena brought her back around and scanned the riverbank.

Brix stepped out of the brush. "Sorry to startle you. How is Shells?"

Rusty pulled up beside her, flustered and out of breath.

"Not good. We need to see Brael. Is your sister in her lodge?"

Brix nodded. "Should be. If not, she may be visiting Quan. They were planning to send someone to Shells tomorrow if no news came."

"We need her help. Maybe more." Ambrena urged the horse across the river.

The lodges of Shims lifted up off the ground. The river nearby occasionally flooded, and would destroy the lodges if not grounded up high. Quan, of course, lived in a ground level lodge on a hill nearby. If it was washed away, much knowledge would be lost that could never be regained.

Children chattered and played on the ground as people strung their gatherings from racks under the lodges. Even though she recognized most of the plants, there were a few that were less familiar. Perhaps Brael used some herbs Dover didn't know, or use often.

A few steps led up to Brael's lodge on a broken grey rock nearby.

Ambrena slid off the horse, and walked up the broken rock to Brael's entry. She knocked beside the entry. "Brael, are you there?"

No answer. She waited as long as she dared, and then scrambled back down the crumbling rock.

Rusty waited on her.

"I'll check Quan's. We need to talk to him anyway."

If Rusty had already checked Quan's they'd be that much closer to knowing what to do next. Normally, she would have taken the initiative to do so. She used to be so sure of herself. Corandra had led her to doubt herself, something Ambrena had hoped Tanna and Zella would see and talk to her about.

Quan's entry was partially open. She knocked. "Quan, it's Ambrena and Rusty. We need to see you and Brael."

"I'll be right out," Quan said. "Go on to the treasury. Brael went there with Calen's replacement."

That can't be good. Calen had led the Webbels since the uprising. She sighed and walked back to Rusty.

"Come on. Grab our gatherboards off the horses. I need some more medicines anyway. Calen has been replaced."

"Is he alive?"

"No idea. We'll find out soon." She grabbed her gatherboard and asked a boy nearby to take the horses to Shim's herd lodge. The boy looked like a son of Wenda, or Wale, two women hunters.

"Have you seen, or heard anything unusual lately," She asked as he turned to go.

He tilted his head, looked at her, and then shook his head. The horses followed his lead.

He must be Jasey, the child who couldn't speak. No one knew why. Dover had talked to him when no one in Shims could figure out why he didn't talk. Sometimes, he did make sounds. She wasn't

sure if others would trust him as a healer, as he couldn't explain how to take a medicine, or verbally comfort anyone.

A silent life locked inside his body and mind. He was smart, and used signals to communicate with people and animals. People in Shims treated him as normal as anyone else. Animals followed him everywhere, even more than they followed other people. People from the other villas avoided him, mostly because they felt the conversation was all on their part, with no reciprocation from Jasey. They didn't know the signals, and wouldn't use them often enough to remember them if they tried to learn them.

At the treasury building, the entries were wide open. Windsun covers were attached, though open. A few were tattered. Tuttle would be making new ones to keep out the winter wind.

"Hi Ambrena, come on in," Brael said. "We have to replace the covers soon, and make the winter entry replacements. It's going to be colder than usual." She sorted through the contents of a box at her side.

Ambrena sat her gatherboard down and reached in to grab a piece of material. It was red and black. She shivered as she dropped it back into the box. She had seen enough blood and muck that those two colors would never look good together again.

Lavina from Webbel came over to the box. "Not a good combination?"

"No," Ambrena said. "So many sick children in Shells. We watched Zande die."

Rusty sat beside her. "Wish I had done something different."

Brael reached out and took her hand. "Rusty, whatever you did, or didn't do, wasn't completely your fault. Perhaps there is a reason, deeper than we know. A hard winter is coming."

Rusty reached into the box. "Our villas aren't overflowing, and ages are pretty regular. Usually sickness takes the older people, not the toddlers. If Tanna's baby Ola dies, I'm not sure if she will go on living."

"There was a lot of blood loss afterwards. Tanna won't want to live if Ola dies like Zande did. She wanted her so much. For Shells, she will try to live, maybe," Ambrena said.

A shadow crossed the entry. Quan hobbled in and sat on a small rock. "Tell us what happened."

Ambrena and Rusty shared the story.

Quan nodded at points.

Brael and Lavina gave up sorting the rat gnawed entry and windsun covers.

"Beyond anything I know," Brael said.

"I saw you had plants I don't recognize. What are they?" Ambrena asked.

"A few of our hunters found some new plants to the south of us. We aren't sure what they are. After they dry, we will test them," Brael said.

The testing of new leaves could be dangerous, and even deadly. Or, what they could cure could remain unknown to the tester. Dover had told Ambrena she might have to do that someday. If it were something to make the endless coughing stop, she wouldn't know, as she wasn't coughing.

A breeze rustled leaves in a corner.

If Brael didn't know anything, they would have to go somewhere else. "Lavina, do you know if Calen, or anyone in Webbel, know the location of any other villas?"

Lavina shook her head. "Anyone who knew, either died, or left long ago. I wish we knew where Mills was. The object that Blake had planned to have built would have helped us stay warm in winter, though I don't know how."

"What was it?" Rusty asked.

Lavina frowned. "I have no idea. I overheard men talking about it once. I didn't hear much, and hid as soon as they opened the entry. They were dark days."

"We have to find someone," Ambrena said. "Dan suggested we look to the northeast, where Uden and Fendon go. Do you know more?"

"Brix thinks they sometimes come with a hunting group. Though the rest of the group never comes near the villas," Brael said. "I can't imagine traveling a long distance, just two people with lions and tigers all over the Grass Sea."

Quan stretched his legs and leaned forward. "Why do Dover and Zella think you need to search beyond the villas now?"

Rusty held out her hands. "Shelpit is mostly empty. I found a few things west of Klapit, not enough for two seasons. Westpit, well, our

team decided it is still too dangerous, the tumbled teeth still cover the known search areas. They don't want to go back there, any more than I want to go back to Klapit."

Quan nodded. "I understand. I don't want to leave the one villa I've ever known any more than you do. So now, you search for a cure, and a new place for all the villas."

Rusty nodded. "Only our villa mines the pits. We need to bring Tanna's vision of togetherness to pass. To be one villa, instead of six. I don't know how."

A knock by the entry interrupted Brael.

Ambrena looked up to see Brix. She beckoned to him.

"I don't think you two need to travel alone either. You need a hunter with you. I will go with you, if no one else will." Brix sat down beside Rusty.

Ambrena shook her head. "No one should go who doesn't want to. We can make it to somewhere."

Brix pointed a stick at her. "Before the cold winds blow? And be able to grab food from the back of a horse?"

He was right, and she knew it. They did need a hunter, for food, safety, and finding their way back. She had never trained for travel. Perhaps that was a weakness in their villas. They never travelled beyond their villa cluster. Even the monkeys had a larger travel range than they did.

"We will need you. If Brael can spare you." Ambrena closed her eyes and clutched her gatherboard.

Brael nodded. "Brix is our best hunter. He can help you most. What medicines do you think you need to round out your supply?"

"Let's see what you have. I don't want to take anything you don't have much of."

Brael laughed and led the way to the store of medicines. "We have plenty of all travel medicines."

Chapter 14

Corandra raced back to Zella's and grabbed her gatherboard. She had to find food and keep up. Ambrena and Rusty would probably ride directly to Tuttle as they left the villa. She didn't want to be too far behind.

Her face stiffened as she ran back to Ellie. Zella would find the container, and know she had been here. If caught, they'd try to convince her to stay.

Rusty and Ambrena couldn't travel alone. She had to save Ola, and all the other toddlers, before it was too late, if it wasn't already.

Ellie raced the back way around the villa to catch up with Rusty and Ambrena. She stopped before the garden.

Rusty and Henry talked in the middle of the garden.

Ambrena waited further away.

A bush hid Corandra and Ellie from view. She urged Ellie through the underbrush along a little used trail, so she wouldn't be seen. Every twig snap made her jump.

Ahead, Rusty adjusted her gatherboard and urged her horse down the path. Ambrena rode alongside her.

Henry glanced back at Corandra's hiding place.

Corandra's heart beat loudly. She breathed deep.

Henry smiled and walked down the trail toward Shelpit.

Dust settled as Rusty and Ambrena rode down the trail.

Corandra urged Ellie to follow.

Ellie bounded along, and then skidded to a stop.

Henry stood in front of her with his arms crossed on a narrow stretch of trail. "Thought you'd follow them."

"I have to go. Let me by." Ellie sidestepped under her.

Henry stomped his foot. "Zella would say you've caused enough trouble already with all the worry you've given us while gone."

Corandra tried to urge Ellie around Henry.

Ellie raised her head and snorted.

"I don't want Zella to worry. I want to fix what I broke. Let me through."

Henry raised his arm and pointed back to the villa. "Go back Corandra. Go back to Zella's now."

Ellie sidestepped again, and stumbled.

"Don't hurt my camel. I'll follow if I have to walk."

"Not without Zella's permission you won't." Henry grabbed Ellie's face, and pushed her back out of the narrow spot in the trail.

"Zella isn't leader. She can't make the decisions for me."

Henry held the fur on Ellie's face. "Zella can make the decisions for you. She hasn't declared you an adult. You are close. Showing some helpful responsibility might encourage her to announce you as an adult at the Spring Trade. Don't you want your own lodge to be away from me?"

Corandra tried to pull Ellie away. "Of course, silly. I am responsible. I have to find the cure."

Henry grabbed her foot. "If you are killed doing it, it won't help anyone. Stay and help us."

"Ambrena and Rusty can't go alone either."

Henry nodded. "They won't. Of that, I'm sure. They will stop in the other villas and someone will go with them."

Ellie snorted as Henry pushed her back gently.

"Okay. I'll meet with Zella. Bring her here though." Perhaps he was right. Better to make him happy.

Henry half stepped back. "Do I need to tie you to a tree so you won't run away again?"

"I didn't run away! I went for an answer." She couldn't believe he thought that.

"Everyone thinks you ran away from the mess, because you didn't want to stay and help clean up after sick children. That's why what you did wasn't responsible, regardless of your intentions." Henry stared up at her.

"Fine. I'll wait. That's not what I meant, and you know it." Corandra slid down off Ellie.

Henry laughed. "I know. I think Zella knows too. We need her opinion and consent."

"Be back quick." Corandra sighed. If the people of Shells really thought she abandoned them, she'd be in worse shape than ever. A new villa could be the answer. Who would have her?

Ellie nibbled on the dried grass nearby.

Zella arrived at the trail entrance.

Corandra couldn't read her expression. Zella was good at hiding her feelings, or showing alternate thoughts.

"So glad you returned. Henry said you brought something."

"I left it in your lodge. It might help. I need to go with Rusty and Ambrena." Corandra stood, unmoving.

"We need you here. Without them, we have no one to run Shelpit."

Corandra shook her head. "I don't like digging, or telling others what to do. And I can't tell two plants from each other."

"My daughter. I know I've been harsh with you occasionally. Please don't leave. Come back with me now. It's your lodge too." Zella took her hands.

She pulled away. "I'm an adult now. I did something bad, and have to fix it. Even if it means going away forever." She stared at Zella, willing an expression on her face. Anything. Her throat gulped.

Zella sat down on a tree stump. "Please don't go. Walking is too hard on me. We'll find something you are good at, if we keep trying."

Corandra patted Ellie. "All I'm good at is arguing. I need to go away."

Dover walked up and put his hands on Zella's shoulders. "Perhaps she is right. If she wants to go, let her."

This wasn't the way it was supposed to be. Dover never gave up. Her heart beat faster.

Zella looked up at him.

"However," he said. "We need Corandra to do one more thing before she leaves Shells for good."

He had said "for good." He didn't want her to come back. Her eyes stung, even though she knew it was how everyone felt. "What would that be? I'll try to do something." Dover had always tried to convince her to stay, and find something she was good at.

He nodded and helped Zella to her feet. "Stay with us tonight and show us what you found."

"I need to go. I'll lose them."

Dover took her arm. "No. They'll be at Shims tonight. We need you to go there tomorrow with Henry, if they don't come back soon after daylight. We need a message brought back here of where they intend to go."

"Can I follow them then?"

"I'd rather you didn't. You will have to make that decision then. I think perhaps, you need to stay at Webbel for the winter. It would be good for you, and them."

They still didn't trust her. "Come on Ellie."

Dover put one arm around her, and one arm around Zella, as they walked back to the villa. "Remember, Rusty and Ambrena are several seasons older than you. They attained gen two adult status this spring. Don't rush so. Enjoy the chance to explore skills."

Corandra refused to snifle. She walked Ellie back to the herd lodge. With a goodbye pat to her best friend, she followed Zella to their lodge. It wouldn't take long. Then, they wouldn't know where she was again. It might be for the best. After all, then they wouldn't worry.

She spent the evening with Zella sorting through the paper in the box she had brought back.

Zella's face was long as she listened to the story of Corandra's trip. She looked through the pages, and placed them back, without appearing to actually read them.

Corandra hadn't tried, as words and symbols were difficult for her. Everything looked blurry when she tried to learn to read the letters as Zella taught them. Somehow, they never made sense.

One bound pile was colorful. She picked it up and moved between the paper sheets as carefully as she could. Colorful pictures looked clearer from several body lengths away. Birds, animals, and even trees looked different from the ones she saw every day. The letters, even at a distance made little sense. They were tiny and ran together.

"Zella, what do they say to you?"

She took the pages and checked several. "Reminds me of one I found long ago. It shows places and animals far away, and gives their names. Whether they are real, or tales, we will never know."

"Like my drawings?"

The paper in her hand fluttered to her lap. "Much like them. We know the ancestor's artwork was complicated. I don't know how to reproduce it. Your skill with that might rival theirs, with the right tools." Zella said.

"Wouldn't serve much purpose? Art without meaning. No one needs that! Everyone says so." Corandra shuffled her feet on the sandy floor.

The fire crackled and lit the lodge as well as possible.

"Perhaps. We only have so much space for art. You okay?" Zella's crooked smile winked in the firelight.

Corandra rolled over, away from the fire. "My eyes always hurt when I try to look at paper. Outside, I can see anything in the distance well."

"I wish there were something I could do to help you."

"So do I. I'll go to sleep now, if you don't mind."

"Sleep Corandra. May you feel better in the morning." Zella picked up the pages again. She put them aside and took the group Corandra had been looking at. Holding them close, she wrinkled her brow and concentrated so hard she didn't hear the log snap in half.

Corandra woke often during the night.

Zella sat by the fire reading and watching. Perhaps the pages were more exciting than Corandra knew. Or, perhaps she was waiting to see if Corandra would keep her promise.

Chapter 15

Shims' treasury bustled as people gathered. One woman handed Rusty a Tuttle blanket to add to her gatherboard. Children ran in out of the dimness, to embrace the awakening dawn.

Rusty breathed deeply. People she knew, and a few she barely knew, buzzed around her. Dust floated in the open entryway. Life had been so simple. Her plans for the future as the dig leader had become a reality. Now, her return to Shells, and the future she had dreamed of, seemed doubtful. They wouldn't want her to lead the pit mining anymore after what happened. Sending her on this trip had to be Zella's way of finding someone new to take her place while she was gone. No one in the villa had as much interest in mining as she had. Even if there were any of the ancestor's tools left to mine.

Ambrena touched her shoulder. "We'll be okay. Uden can't be that far away. Maybe she knows where Zella's mother went. I think that's half the reason Dover and Zella want us to go."

"To find where she went?" Rusty pulled out of her thoughts. She looked around dazed and confused, unsure of where she was.

Ambrena slung her gatherboard on her back, and pulled the pocket to the front. "She took a lot of forgotten knowledge with her. Dover knows of one or two of the Shims' group who may have gone to the same place a generation or two before. Maybe they came and asked Zella's mother to join them."

"And then Jorn joined them too," Rusty said. Would the Shells adults become sick, as the children grew better? It had happened before. When the adults couldn't take care of themselves, and the kids couldn't either. Many, or even most of Shells, might starve during the winter. Maybe the unknown village could all help, or at least replace the dead.

Jasey waited beside their horses. He grinned up at them.

Brix rode up on a horse leading a heavily loaded camel. "Jasey and I are going with you."

Rusty patted her horse and turned to Brix. "No, this is my job. I made the decision that killed Zande."

Ambrena shook her head.

Jasey climbed in between the huntboards loaded on the camel.

"Quan's decision. Wanna argue with him?" Brix raised his eyebrow and stared at her.

Rusty closed her eyes. Zella didn't trust her to be dig leader now. She didn't even trust her to find her way to a villa she had never been to. No surprise.

"You'll need me to find trails, and to protect you," Brix said.

Ambrena laughed. "I hope we can protect ourselves. We will need your help finding food though. Thanks for offering. Rusty and I will ride alone from Shims to the hunter's separation point, if you don't mind."

Brix nodded once, and waved them on.

The clear sky and rising sun didn't lighten Rusty's heart. Brix and Jasey joining them weighed her down, as more responsibility she didn't want. Telling Corandra to be responsible was easy. Taking responsibility for others while fixing the mistake she had made with Corandra, was another matter entirely.

Ambrena stopped at the edge of Shims and spoke to the crowd who had followed them. "We don't know where we are going, or when we will be back. Thank you all for gathering supplies, as well as sending Brix and Jasey. I've no idea if anyone can help Ola, or the others. It might be better to stay away from Shells."

The group waved to them as they walked the horses off toward the separation stone. Brix and Jasey lagged behind waving goodbye.

"Rusty, quit worrying. We shouldn't travel alone. No one knows where we are going. We may need help bringing Jorn and Uden back, and a cure."

"Aren't you scared?" The Grass Sea hid lions, tigers, and so many other hunting animals.

"Of course," Ambrena said. "I feel like I am giving up everything, and everyone I know, for the unknown. Zella, Dover, Tanna, and Robin are depending on us. Far more than anyone else can imagine."

The separation stone loomed ahead, a place where hunters and gatherers stopped and rested together. Brix and Jasey would expect Rusty and Ambrena to wait for them there.

"I don't know what I want. It should have been so simple to be dig leader."

"And for me to help others. Goddess Kafa and Amber have some reason for this. We have to find the reason, and do our best. You've always been the strong one. We depend on you."

Rusty stopped beside the stone. "My heart is broken. Zande isn't my child. He was as much my child as you and I belong to Tanna and Zella. Glenna and I shared teaching him his toddler skills."

"I know you did," Ambrena smiled. "If you two stayed together right now, you'd be fighting like Corandra and Henry do. A few days apart will bring everyone back to a new normal."

Rusty fought to hold back the tears. Brix and Jasey must not see her cry, or they would send her back to Shims, or to Shells, in disgrace.

Horses snorted, on the other side of the stone.

"Let Brix lead us for a little while. You will know when you are ready to lead again," Ambrena said.

She nodded. It had to hurt Ambrena too, who had always looked up to Rusty, as a little older, and somehow, more a part of the villa life flow. No idea why, or how, that happened. It did. Rusty preferred being in the background, quiet and unseen.

Ambrena led them out into the Grass Sea, and called for Brix and Jasey.

The men waited for them beyond the stone, on a little used pathway.

Rusty stayed at the rear of the line. Walls of grass, even and tall waved beside her. Finding her way through would be as tough now, as long ago when she walked and carried her infant brother from secret Webbel to find Zella. Then though, there had been trails at least, and small animals to follow. And hope for the future.

She let the horse follow her friends. This mare was a granddaughter of the grandmother's Sandy look-a-like. It had amazed Zella how fast they had become used to people. Of course, other villas they didn't know may have lost their horses, and these may have been recent descendants of them.

Lost in thought she didn't recognize the deep rumble in the distance. It sent shivers up her spine. Perhaps the ground had shaken. Goddess Amber could be warning them to turn back. Or,

elephants walked nearby. A few were known to journey through the region in the fall.

Brix stopped near a group of trees, a little larger than a lodge. The group bunched up close together.

Low rumbling intensified.

Rusty's heart beat fast.

Even though few elephants came through between the villas, many visited Lake Kafa to the west. That bellowing didn't sound like an elephant looking for food or water.

Brix maneuvered the horse's back ends together, with Rusty between Jasey and Ambrena.

A dig stick should be enough to ward off stray foraging elephants. There was plenty of food for them, and little competition. She wanted to run for the trees so they wouldn't be seen. Brix however waited, and motioned for silence.

Three great grey beasts came around the right side, and four around the left side of the small patch of trees. The elephants were not alone. Four people rode on the backs of the lead elephants. Their clothes were grey and closely fitting, almost like an animal's natural skin.

Who were these people on elephants? Rusty drew in a deep breath. Her horse shifted and tried to pull away.

Jasey grabbed the horse's mane and held her still.

The elephants surrounded Rusty's group of horses.

One man sneered at them and grunted to the man beside them. "One man out alone with two girls, and a child. That's unusual, even for your strange groups." His voice had a strange melodic difference that distracted from the words spoken.

"Where are you from?" Rusty asked.

He laughed, and so did his companion. "Doesn't matter. We have been watching your group. We need that one to help us." He pointed a spear right at Rusty.

Brix glanced back at her with one eye.

"What do you think you need me for?" Rusty tried to not look, or act, surprised.

The man nodded toward his elephants. "Our animals do the hard work. We need a dig leader to do the delicate digging. Our

diggers are repairing our boats now. We know you lead your group in the dig, where only men should lead." He laughed long and loud.

It sent shivers up Rusty's spine. Brix had his hunting spear, though it'd be no use against four people with spears, and seven elephants. And boats, there had been something about them in the lore Zella shared at gatherings. She'd figure it out later.

Three elephants moved back to create an opening to the east. The elephant rode by the woman took the lead.

"Don't worry, we won't keep you long. Not after the snow flies. Now move!" The man shook his spear at the horses.

The horses jumped, and skittered through, following the woman.

Rusty held on, unsure what, if anything, she could do.

The crude man rode in the back, with the other elephants surrounding them.

Rusty had been jostled to the front of the horses, and was closest to the woman.

Occasionally, the woman looked back at Rusty with an unreadable expression on her face.

What could they be taking them for? How long had they been watching the villas? And where were they from?

She glanced to silent Jasey who rode up beside her.

He held his hands out, palms up.

From anyone in Shells, the motion would have no meaning. For him, it meant to wait. He might have a plan.

Rusty motioned a slight hand nod in understanding. Ambrena, and maybe Brix would notice the communication. Hopefully, the roamers wouldn't.

Jasey slipped back behind her.

It always amazed Rusty how well Jasey could communicate without words. Animals understood him almost as well as his family and friends. Though a few people shied away from his quiet ways, most had no problem with his lack of speech.

A few Webbels, including Calen turned red, and moved away, at the sight of Jasey. Others held their heads high, and tried not to speak, for fear their voices would crack around him. Though, it couldn't really be their fault he couldn't talk. He was born over four seasons after Blake and Orid died. However, the Webbel villa saw Corandra, and Jasey, as a reminder of those evil days.

Traveling had quickly become a nightmare. Already well beyond any place Rusty had been, she almost wished she had stayed at Shims. Of course, the plan had been to find hope, help, and others. They had found other people, though not anyone they were looking for.

Snakes darted across the path, upsetting the lead elephant. It trumpeted and danced in the tall grass. The unknown woman struggled to hold on.

Rusty's horse stepped out of the way. If she were alone, she'd escape then. With Jasey, Brix, and Ambrena behind her, there was no way they could all escape. Jasey might not be able to escape, with a fully loaded camel. The horses, she was less sure of, particularly, in a region they didn't know. It would be too easy to become lost out here in the Grass Sea.

The woman fell off the elephant, and it careened out of control. The elephant the woman had led, raced right toward her body on the ground.

Rusty covered her eyes. She couldn't escape now.

Ambrena wouldn't leave a woman to die.

So, she had to stay, for her.

Chapter 16

Ambrena followed behind Jasey. Her mind raced, asking the questions she knew were on everyone's mind. When Jasey rode up beside Rusty, she struggled not to smile. She mustn't let the roamers know she recognized the sign he gave her.

If it gave her hope; that was what mattered. Rusty had been too hard on herself lately, and that was unusual enough. This becoming an adult was much tougher than either expected, or dreamed of, as they made their plans for the future the last several seasons.

Three male roamers watched ahead, and not toward her. She glanced back at Brix and repeated Jasey's sign.

The lead elephant trumpeted.

Her horse bounced under her, skittering to the side. Ambrena struggled to turn back to the front, and regain her balance.

In front, the elephant the woman rode held its trunk high in the air. She slipped off behind it. Directly into the path of the elephant she had been leading. Her elephant sidestepped out of the way of the oncoming one, and trotted east across the Grass Sea.

Ambrena gasped and urged her horse forward, hoping to scare the stampeding elephant. She raced past Jasey and Rusty in a flash.

The second elephant careened to the side. It kicked the woman hard as it changed direction, and raced off across the Grass Sea. In the distance, the two elephants met and slowed together.

The male roamers screamed and yelled at her.

One quick glance, to be sure it was safe, and Ambrena leaped to the ground, pulling her medical gatherboard with her. Her horse stood still beside her, blocking anyone from coming up behind her.

The woman groaned. Blood trickled from her lip.

"Stupid, stupid little sister. Do you want to die too?" The roamer leader screamed as he stomped up to her.

"Vendon, no." The woman clasped her stomach and tried to roll over. A scream rent the air.

The roamer stood over her, as the other two walked up.

Ambrena reached to feel the woman's forehead.

Vendon smacked at her. "Don't touch her. She will die."

Ambrena gasped at being struck. No one had ever struck her. Not since the evil days. "I can help her. I have my medical gatherboard."

The man shifted on his feet. "You are a child, and a girl at that."

Those words could have come from Blake, or Orid. She shivered.

"Let her try." One roamer male sat down beside the woman.

"The girl might can help Yall."

Vendon sneered at the man. "Marken, I don't want her to help if it will leave my little sister unable to work for the community. We will have to leave her here to die. That wound is not survivable." He hefted his spear and aimed it at the young woman's head.

"Let her try, please. At least allow the young woman to check her." Marken pleaded with Vendon. He touched Yall's hand, and then turned to Ambrena.

Ambrena glanced between the three. The unnamed man stayed out of the conversation and watched Rusty, Jasey, and Brix closely to be sure they didn't escape.

Yall groaned, and tried to roll over again.

"Don't move. Vendon, I have to help her. I won't give her any medicine if you don't want me to. I won't kill her." Even if you did steal us. The others could escape while she helped Yall, and come back for her with help. She gulped. With Yall injured, they could be dangerous, if they treated women as some of the ancestral stories said had been common once. Vendon sounded like one of those ancestors. The ancestors Goddess Amber railed against.

Vendon stepped back and almost nodded.

She pulled out a piece of fur to wipe Yall's face.

Almost out of side vision, Rusty, Brix, and Jasey sat watching her. Their horses grazed nearby. Brix and Jasey held their hands flat above the ground in a stay sign. They could communicate while she checked on the young woman, who may, or may not, survive. Her own breath slowed; glad they wouldn't leave her behind.

First thing was to check if the mouth bled. Ambrena touched the woman's cheek. She turned her head partially toward Ambrena, and groaned. Good. The blood was from a cut, and not from deep inside.

"Can you speak? What is your name?" Ambrena leaned close to listen.

"Yall. Scared."

Ambrena pulled back. "That was quite a kick you took from the following elephant. Will they come back?"

"Or go back to Kees." Marken kneeled beside them.

"What a waste. I gave her the gentlest to ride, and she lost control of her. We need all their strength for mining." Vendon shook his spear at the young woman.

Ambrena wanted to close her eyes and shake her head. "Yall, lift your fingers."

She lifted her right hand and wiggled those fingers. Her left hand lifted barely a hand's width, and the finger movements were slow, and unsteady.

Arms and legs were lifted slowly next. She could lift them a palm's width. Not enough muscle control to walk or ride. No problems Ambrena could see, or fix, though she was bruised and bloody.

"I hope you took the brunt on your legs. I need to see your chest, and be sure it is okay. I don't want to open any wounds as they start to close."

"I'll help her sit up," Marken said.

Yall's eyes brightened as he touched her.

All hope wasn't lost, if some in the roamers could care for each other. Healing the mental wounds would be even more difficult than the physical, for this young woman.

Vendon growled at the two.

Yall gasped for breath as she sat up, with Marken assisting her.

Ambrena checked Yall's back. There were angry red welts. No sign of leaking blood. However, deep inside could be damage in the bones, or other organs, and there was no way to know.

Once their ancestors would have been able to know if Yall were hurt inside, though even Dover couldn't guess how. He knew it had been possible, if it wasn't a dream tale that never really happened.

Ambrena sat back and glanced quickly at Rusty. She wanted to wait longer, to allow Yall to begin to heal. "I see little I can offer her besides tea. Yall will be in much pain, and we need to let her rest until the bleeding stops."

Vendon grunted. "Xile, gather the elephants. We'll wait here. Take one of the horses, and try to round up the two elephants that ran off."

Xile glared at Vendon, then at Rusty, Jasey, and Brix before taking Brix's horse and racing away.

"We will not start a fire and make tea. Cold water will be good enough for a foolish sister." Vendon stomped to his elephant.

Brix leaned his huntboard forward.

Last night, Brael had asked Jasey to show them many of his typical daily signals. Of course, she didn't know his hunting signs, and that looked like one, though she couldn't decipher it.

"What startled the elephant?" Marken pulled a water skin from inside his shirt.

"Two snakes raced." Yall took a deep breath. "Across the path." She clutched her side. Blood trickled from her mouth.

Marken glanced at Ambrena.

She touched the water skin, different than the gourds they used. Warm with body heat. It would have to do. Ambrena closed one eye and peered at Yall. Blood from the mouth was not a good sign. Internal bleeding could kill her. Water might help, or it might not. "A little. We need the blood to clot."

Marken moistened her lips with the warm water.

Yall smiled at his touch. She gasped as a spasm of pain jerked her body.

Rusty crawled up beside her. "She has no necklace. Did she lose it?"

"We don't wear necklaces. They tangle in everything. Especially on the boats." Marken caressed Yall's cheek.

Ambrena touched Yall's forehead. It was warm, though not unusually so. "Yall, how do you feel?"

"Not good." She tried to roll over and gasped in pain.

They waited in the sunshine. No one spoke or moved.

Yall breathed slowly, as if every breath hurt.

Ambrena wanted to help her, and make it all okay. Her own breathing quickened. A pat on the shoulder, or a hug wouldn't fix her. Touch would hurt her more.

Xile returned with the two elephants in tow.

Marken caressed Yall's cheek. "I'll put her on my pack. Can you help me?" He looked right at Ambrena.

Something about his eyes were hauntingly familiar. She nodded.

They strapped Yall to a huntboard big enough to hold her whole body easily. He packed his belongings around her to hold her steady. Together they tied it on the elephant he had ridden.

Ambrena stepped back beside Brix, Jasey, and Rusty, and picked up her gatherboard. It was barely large enough to cover her back as she walked.

"Climb on your horses! You aren't escaping now. We need more hands than ever." Vendon waited until they were in the center of the small elephant herd before following them.

Ambrena rode beside Marken.

Yall didn't struggle or cry from the bumpy ride.

"Why do you need us?"

Marken glanced back at Vendon. He steadied the huntboard Yall rode on carefully balanced in front of him. "We took our boats down to the giant lake, and a bad storm destroyed them. The drought here, isn't there."

Ambrena didn't know of any giant lakes. "Where is the giant lake?"

"Far south of here. We have tools to make our boats go faster. One capsized, and three boats full of our people disappeared in the storm. We don't know if they survived."

Storms would have been nice; they had been dry so long. Although, any storm that destroyed boats would be too strong for their gardens, and might have killed them as well. "Wish it had rained here, like it usually does."

"We need your dig leader to help us dig. Our leader is missing. We have to find the pieces we need to make our boats go, and search for them this winter, away from our gardens at Kees."

"Are some of your group there now?"

"Yes. Only our boat could make the trip back. Two boats, and all the people on them, disappeared completely. A third broke, and made it to shore. They are still there, searching, and trying to find supplies to repair their boats."

Vendon didn't stop when they reached a river. His grey clothes blended in with the elephant, and the water as it swam across. The

horses swam across, eyes blazing at the strangeness of being fully immersed in water. Even with three roamers riding the elephants, there was no hole large enough for all four to escape to safety.

Yall whimpered as the water lapped at the huntboard.

Ambrena couldn't reach to feel her forehead. Internal injuries could mean all kinds of things were wrong. For some, warm tea would help. For others, it would make them worse. Sometimes something warm on the location of the injury would help. For others, it would kill. Dover might know what to do if he were here.

Of course, if he were here, he'd fight his way out. They had to escape at some point. Brix would have to help them return safely, and warn the others.

They reached the other shore and scrambled back up onto dry land. Vendon didn't even glance back. The horses struggled up the bank. Xile prodded them on.

"What about your gardens?" Ambrena asked.

The Grass Sea opened back out around them. It all looked the same, never ending.

"They grow in winter. We are short on food right now, and many of our gardeners are among the missing."

"Please don't hurt our villas. We have a sickness killing small children."

Marken steadied Yall on the huntboard. "I know. We have watched you. We are late to find our supplies for growing vegetables. There were too many extra days spent trying to rescue and find the rest of our burb. If the rest of our group had returned, we wouldn't need you four." He looked down at Yall's face.

She was pale, and in obvious pain. Lines formed on her face as she grimaced from each bounce.

Ambrena moved back in the group beside Jasey. She would try to privately share the signs she felt she needed to. If she could remember them. Being able to "talk" without Vendon and Xile knowing helped.

The terrain grew rockier.

Vendon switched places with Xile.

Jasey glanced her way.

Ambrena made three quick signs. Wait, she knew that one. She was less sure how to convey they won't hurt us while they need us. If we escape, they will steal others, and maybe hurt them more.

Jasey lifted his head.

Did she lift her hand correctly and say "wait," or did she tilt it the opposite way, and say "scream?" Before, when reading his signs, she had always been able to ask questions to clarify. Now, she was trying to figure them out correctly. She had never needed to silently communicate. Now, her life, and the lives of Rusty, Brix, and Jasey depended on her remembering the correct signs.

Rusty wasn't doing well either. Her face was pale. She clutched her horse's mane tightly. What memories haunted her on this ride? Her usual chatter was absent. A solemn silence ensued, broken only by the patter of hooves, and the plop of elephant's feet.

Chapter 17

Corandra woke.

Zella and Dover sorted through the papers.

The fire fascinated her. Something about the flames leaping toward the roof without reaching it struck her as special. This almost tamed wild thing was more like her than most people realized. The circle of stones held the fire captive, while it danced high to give them light, warmth, and cook their food.

If she had something of value to share, maybe Shells would accept her, and her outbursts would become more tame, much as the fire beside her. It crackled and cackled at her, laughing at her fears, and feeding her hunger to leave. She tossed a handful of sand at it, to hear the hiss, and watch the flames dance merrily, always out of reach.

"Morning Corandra," Zella said. "Guess you want to leave now?"

She nodded, still too asleep to speak.

"You are welcome to come back with Henry." Dover placed one pile of paper at his feet. "There is something for you to do. We will find a place for you in the community."

Corandra sat up. "My place is to be disagreeable it seems."

She pushed the hair out of her eyes. "Where is Henry anyway?"

Zella laughed. "Since you dislike him so. I'm surprised you asked."

She pulled her blanket close and faced the fire. "Well, he is supposed to travel with me, much as I don't want him to."

The pages in Zella's hand fluttered. "Henry will be back."

She reached out her hand and touched Corandra's shoulder. "Since you dislike him so much, you won't have to travel alone with him, at least part way. Glenna is going with you both back to her lodge at Almond."

Fear and rage boiled up inside Corandra. To be saddled with Henry was bad enough. Glenna too! Glenna would despise her for killing her child. In fact, she hadn't seen her, or anyone from the villa since she returned. The thought blinded her. She clenched her fists and pulled them close to her body.

"Glenna will kill me."

Dover handed her a cup of hot tea. "Glenna won't hurt you. Drink some tea. You need some strength. She wants to go to Almond to grieve among family, and needs an escort."

Corandra jumped back, nearly knocking the teacup out of Dover's hand. "I'm no escort! I killed her son." She rubbed her eyes, and tried to keep from crying. She would not show emotion. Too much had already leaked out. No wonder no one liked her, or wanted her around. The hard wall of the lodge prevented her from moving any further away from Zella and Dover. She couldn't leap over the fire. It would burn her, much as her own temper did.

Zella moved over and put her arm around her shoulder. "I'll help you pack if you want."

Corandra nodded. Her fist was in her mouth. She couldn't speak if she wanted to.

Containers lined the wall by the entry. Corandra knew what should be stored in each. She crawled over to the first and looked in. Dried nutria. Zella's favorite for snacking, or stews. There were plenty more at the breeding grounds, so she could take a few pieces. Two strips as long as her palm should be enough for today. She wrapped them and placed them in her gatherboard.

"Take at least three handfuls," Zella said.

"I don't want you to do without. You won't be able to dry more until the children are well."

"There is plenty. And what else have we had to do besides mind the meat dryers while the children are sick? In fact, several drying racks are ready to be emptied today. I need more storage space for the fresh dried nutria. We have dried zebra too. It has given several of us something to do while staying close to the villa." Zella reached her hand into the container and pulled out more. "I'll pick up more later today."

It didn't take long to fill her gatherboard. Dover handed her one last fur wrapped package to place on top. What it was, he didn't say.

Henry knocked beside the entry. "We're ready. I brought Ellie for you."

Corandra picked up her gatherboard, and walked to the entry. Henry's face showed no emotion, or thought.

She might never see Zella or Dover again. Somehow, goodbye didn't seem like enough. She struggled to open her mouth. Not daring to look back, she said, "I'll miss you both. Thank you for taking care of me; and trying to help me be who you wanted me to be. I wish I could've."

She hurried to Ellie, and settled herself and her gatherboard.

Henry shook his head as he led the three down the pathway. "She's crying you know. You don't have to leave her."

"I do have to leave. She won't miss me long. I was too much trouble."

Henry stopped at the entry to the horse pen. "Of the four daughters and one son she raised, she only has one daughter left at Shells. Her oldest."

"You could all have stayed," Corandra shifted the gatherboard. It wasn't her choice for Henry, Rusty, or Ambrena to leave. Now she had to watch Henry, and find Rusty and Ambrena, as well as solve the problem of the illness.

"Someone has to go with you. No one should travel alone."

He mustn't know she knew he was right.

"Glenna, I'm sorry. Nothing I can say will bring Zande back." Corandra said.

Glenna's hair covered part of her face, and she brushed it out of her eyes. "I know. I'm going to see Yananda. I'll come back soon. Tell Rusty I miss her when you see her."

"We have to find them. Let's go." Corandra urged Ellie back onto the path.

Glenna followed next, with Henry behind them.

Corandra kept her eyes forward, and wouldn't look back. It wouldn't do any good anyway. What she didn't already know by heart couldn't be important in the new life she hoped to find. Maybe the shattered bits of her soul would come together in another villa, far away.

Without stopping, she pushed on to Almond. If Glenna or Henry had shouted, she might not even have heard them. Her focus was inside, planning, preparing herself, and being sure she knew where all the supplies were she needed for a trip alone. Regardless of what Henry said, she would make the trip alone. She could leave

him behind at Shims to return to Zella and Dover. Or, if he followed her to Webbel, she'd sneak away in the night.

At Almond, all the people crowded around Glenna, and helped her off her horse. Tears sparkled on everyone's cheeks, and in their eyes. People were so happy to see Glenna there, in her birth villa.

Corandra gritted her teeth. No one had come to see her last night when she returned to Shells. She sniffled, not about to let a tear join the crowd on the ground. Ellie turned and started for Shims.

"Don't rush off," Henry said.

"We have to reach Shims before dark."

Henry's eyes closed as he clutched his horse's mane. "We will. Wait until Sharel comes back."

Yananda took Glenna's hand and walked down the path.

"Be careful, both of you," Glenna hollered back. "Particularly Corandra. Don't rush off on your own again."

Sharel ran up to Henry with a pile of colorful Tuttle woven cloth. The reds and yellows glittered in the sunshine. "Share with Corandra when you reach Shims. I know she is in a hurry to leave."

Something about the look Sharel gave Henry bothered her. What did that look mean? Would Henry come back and stay with Sharel sometimes, as many couples visit. Or would they stay together, much as Dover and Zella often did? It was an interesting thought. She tried not to laugh as she turned Ellie toward the road to Shims.

Henry caught up and rode beside her. "We can talk more now."

"I've nothing to say." She pulled her camel away from him and raced down the path. A stupid thing to do. Limbs reached out and grabbed at her hair. She slowed down. Maybe he would stay behind her.

Ellie jerked to the right as something small skittered across the path.

"Calm down. What was it?" She couldn't see anything other than a few leaves moving along the trail.

"I think it was a cat." Henry rode up beside her. "I hope it was chasing something, and not being chased."

"The Kafa Goddess isn't happy with me, or she'd quit sending problems across my path." Corandra urged Ellie forward.

"Or, she wants you to stay, like everyone else."

She turned to face Henry. "Who other than you, Zella, and Dover has ever asked me to stay?" No one had, that she knew of.

"Rusty and Ambrena."

"They say that because they helped raise me. And it makes you happy, for some reason."

He didn't answer, and stayed close behind her.

As the shadows stretched across the path, they reached the horse herd lodge for Shims. Henry's horse nickered to friends who lived here.

Corandra slipped off Ellie, took her gatherboard, and let her join the others. A night in Shims, and then on to Webbel, or on her own.

Henry handed her some of the blankets Sharel had given him.

She barely nodded and walked along the trail to the villa of Shims.

The moon slipped into visibility as they stepped into the group of stilted lodges. People were around the outside treasury fire pit. Children and dogs ran and played.

They had missed the evening meal. Perhaps, Rusty and Ambrena were still here.

Brael and Quan would know; if she recognized them.

Chapter 18

Rusty rode behind Ambrena and listened to her talk to Marken. It wasn't much hope. Maybe, if they could make friends with him, they would have a chance to escape. Or, Ambrena would know something to drop in the tea of Vendon and Xile, so they would sleep soundly, and escape. They might even take Marken and Yall with them, to learn about this strange group of people. Zella would like new stories.

Morning seemed long ago, as the sun crept across the sky. She drowsed and nodded, even though the sun wasn't as warm. Napping while riding would give her the strength to escape in the night.

Vendon and Xile rode behind them, watching silently as they crept across the plain.

As shadows lengthened, Vendon called a halt near a pond, like many they had passed. "We won't make it by night. We'll go on in the morning."

The elephants trumpeted at the sight of water, and pulled Xile along. He stayed with them as they tramped down the right side, toward wherever they were going.

Rusty slid off her horse, and waddled to Ambrena, Jasey, and Brix. Riding some each day was normal. All day, was more than she had ever done. Her legs and arms ached.

They helped pull Yall down off of Marken's elephant.

Yall groaned as the huntboard landed on the ground.

"Can you speak?" Ambrena hovered over her face.

The young woman mumbled.

Ambrena would care for her.

Rusty stepped back to sit beside Jasey and Brix. What would these roamers do with them tonight? Would they be safe? Shadowy memories of an Almond villa night long ago haunted her.

Brix opened his pack and pulled out some dried meat. He handed some to both Jasey and Rusty without speaking.

Vendon glared at Ambrena. "When you are done checking on Yall, take your friends and horses to the watering hole. Don't try to escape. Xile knows how to use a spear. And those elephants will catch you."

Ambrena's gatherboard was by her side. She had pulled out a few herbs to supplement their meal. "Will we have a fire? Yall really needs hot tea."

Vendon growled. "When you come back. Marken will gather firewood. Now go."

Jasey scurried off ahead of them with the horses.

Rusty reached for Ambrena's hand as they walked to the left side of the pond.

At the pond, Jasey stepped into the water with the horses. He checked around him, to be sure Vendon, Xile, and Marken were not nearby. With his wet toe, he drew a sign on the edge of the bank.

Rusty glanced at it as she dipped her hands in to drink. He had drawn an "I" beside a spear tip. Did Jasey mean he would go to the villas for help, or that he would sacrifice himself for them to escape? She glanced up at him.

He tapped his chest once and reached for a horse's mane.

She smiled at him.

Brix made a motion with his hand. No words spoken. He then wiped the signs away with his hand.

Of course, Vendon would think neither could speak, and wouldn't recognize Brix's voice when he led the hunters that Jasey would bring back. There was no way to know where these people were taking them. If she had misunderstood Jasey, there would be no way to know, until Brix felt safe speaking again.

They walked back to the camp spot.

Marken left Yall's side to gather wood.

Vendon growled at him, and tapped the ground.

"How is Yall?" Rusty sat beside Ambrena.

Ambrena rubbed the woman's head with cool water.

"She is somewhat warm, though it may be the traveling." Ambrena's eyes widened.

Rusty nodded and twiddled a piece of grass between her fingers. Ambrena wouldn't leave the woman to die. If there were somewhere to dig here, she'd have something to do. Of course, that was why Vendon said they took them. There'd be plenty to dig the next day, wherever they were going.

Marken built the fire in a small circle of stones left by some previous traveler, and set the water to heat. Then, he moved over to sit beside Yall, still on the huntboard.

"What exactly are you looking for?" Rusty asked.

Marken looked up at her. "You know what things are that come out of the ground. You call objects different than we do, some anyway. We need glass, metal, and pre-tools."

"Pre-tools?"

"Items we use to make tools from. Hard to describe. We'll show you when we get there."

Rusty patted Yall's hand. "Z." No, don't say her name.

"I've heard of glass. I've seen tiny scraps. What do you do with it?"

Marken lifted his arms to point the way. "Over there is a place with green glass in the ground. It has other parts, metal, and objects in it. We melt the glass, and separate the pieces. Darker glass we use to let light in our lodges. We also make clearer glass for our gardens. We also need metal, so we can fix and build our boats."

"Green glass? Lots of it? I'd like to see that!"

Yall squeezed Rusty's hand.

"There isn't much anymore. We think it is running out. The elephants have done as much digging as they can. If they go in the pits now, they can't climb out by themselves."

Ambrena brought a cup of heated water to her, and one for Marken and Yall as well.

"So you need us for?"

Marken closed his eyes. "To dig down low in the ground. The elephants will pull vines that drag the buckets out of the pits. We need a lot of glass, in a hurry."

"Their villa is mostly missing," Ambrena said.

Vendon stalked off to join Xile in settling the elephants nearby.

Marken sipped his tea. "Vendon's mother is among the missing. So many are. We have to find them."

Yall's fingers reached for him. "We will."

"Why didn't you ask, rather than steal us?" Rusty said.

Marken shook his head. "I wanted to. Vendon said you wouldn't come on your own. He watched, and saw the girl who left alone. He doesn't understand people who allow girls any opportunity."

Jasey brought fresh hot food from the fire.

"Kees never needed help before, so we never let you know we travel through."

"That explains the elephant herds hunters sometimes see in the fall."

Marken grinned. "That's us. Or, them. Grey clothes to hide on the elephant's backs."

Rusty rested her hand on his. She glanced at Ambrena and Jasey. "Do you know Uden, Fendon, or Jorn?"

He turned his head to look at her. "Not sure the names are familiar. Sometimes people change their names if they travel."

Yall touched her hand. "Undle?"

Rusty shook her head.

"Hey, you are whispering too much!" Vendon shouted. "Come over here so Xile and I can hear you."

Brix walked over to help Marken lift Yall and bring her to the fire. The elephants had gathered around them, and were hobbled together. No escape without being trampled under their feet.

Brix and Jasey wouldn't leave without Rusty and Ambrena.

Ambrena wouldn't leave Yall on the verge of death.

Rusty wouldn't leave until Marken had shown her the green glass and other tools he had mentioned.

Chapter 19

Ambrena rubbed cool water on Yall's forehead. The young woman was close to her own age. Too young to ask a man to sponsor a child. Old enough to plan and prepare for that day. For a woman at this stage in her life to die would be devastating for any villa. She would fight to save her, if it was possible.

The fire flickered on silent faces. Wolves howled in the distance. A lion roared between them and Shims. Stars peeked into sight along the moonlight's path. On such a night, a few seasons ago, some of those lights had blinked closer than she imagined possible for the stars, which were out reach of any human.

Perhaps Goddess Amber flew among the stars overhead, watching over them. If she saw the Pit Miners at night instead of during the day, she would never know they were in trouble. She might not even recognize Ambrena and Rusty so far from Shells.

Yall made a sound, too weak to speak.

Marken leaned over to her. "You can do it, somehow." He picked up a stiff blade of dried grass and handed it to her.

Yall drew something in the dirt and fell back, unable to exert herself anymore.

"What?" Ambrena asked.

Marken smiled. "In Kees, to please our God, we must draw a picture every night before we sleep. Different ages draw different pictures. Yall is supposed to draw two, as she is between ages."

He took the piece of grass and drew a picture Ambrena couldn't see this far from the flames. "We always do it, so we live to see the morning."

Vendon grunted. "Their ways are different. They wouldn't understand."

Ambrena turned to him. "We have group ceremonies. I may be the only person who has individual ceremonies. If others do, they keep it private."

The fire cackled.

"Sleep," Vendon said. "Xile will guard until my turn."

Ambrena shivered and pulled Rusty and Jasey close. Brix stretched his huntboard between them and the fire. Marken and Yall were side by side at their heads.

Vendon stayed on the other side of the fire with Xile.

Ambrena didn't intend to sleep. She feared Xile more than Vendon, and with three young adult women, it simply wasn't safe to sleep. The hazy, smoky memory of her early childhood, mixed with Vendon's attitude toward the young women, and his own sister, sent shivers down her spine even more frightening than any of the ancestor's warning tales Zella had ever repeated.

Sunlight snuck over the horizon as the moon dimmed.

Ambrena stirred, unsure where she was.

Rusty and Jasey slept beside her.

Brix sat beside the fire, stirring the embers. He lifted his finger to his lips.

No elephants in sight.

Marken sat behind her, alone with Yall. "They will be back with the elephants soon. Better wake up Rusty and the boy. Does he talk?"

Ambrena shook her head. She patted Rusty and Jasey awake. "How is Yall?"

Rusty and Jasey scrambled to their feet and rolled their blankets into their gatherboards.

Marken patted Yall's hand. "She woke up earlier."

"Wanna go back to Kees." Yall's eyes opened.

"Soon." Marken looked up at Ambrena with hope and fear in his eyes.

Ambrena quickly checked her. No visible changes since last night. Yall's head was warm. Beads of sweat glistened on her brow. She lightly touched the young woman's stomach.

Yall moaned.

There was no more chance of saving her than there had been to save Zande. Ambrena's eyes closed.

A shadow crossed Marken's face as he bent over Yall.

The elephants returned, followed by Vendon and Xile. "Hurry if you want water. Take your horses. We have to start the dig today."

Marken walked with them and the horses. At the water's edge, he said, "I'll do what I can. Thanks for trying to help Yall."

Brix placed his hand on Marken's shoulder. "Give us a chance. Brael can help."

"Would she, or is that a he?"

Brix laughed quietly. "She is my sister."

Marken's face turned red.

"Travelers don't know our names. Are there many people where we are going?" Brix leaned down to fill his gourd with water.

"All we have are at Kees." Marken shook his head.

Brix nodded. "Jasey?"

Jasey helped his camel out of the water.

"Wait." Brix stepped back above the water line.

They hurried back and started on the journey.

Ambrena rode near Marken and Yall. By midmorning, they had passed many small ponds, and reached an area filled with grey rocks. The elephants trumpeted and raced to a grey rock wall beyond a large central fire pit.

Vendon sneered and pointed at Brix. "You go put your horses and camel in with the elephants. I will show the girls around."

He led them through the rock covered dig area, far larger than Shelpit.

"We usually have many people here. Where you will be digging is that pit over there. No running for the trees. If you find plenty of artifacts, you may be able to leave soon."

After they had some food and water, he handed them buckets and called for two elephants to join them.

"I need to check on Yall, and be sure she is settled. Marken, come with me," Ambrena said.

"Be there before the elephants return!" Vendon shouted. He prodded Jasey with a stick.

Ambrena and Marken settled Yall under the brush in the shade. "May I speak to her?"

He nodded and stepped back, far enough that he couldn't clearly hear what she said.

"Are we safe?"

"Angry, not bad." Yall breathed slowly, her chest barely rising.

"Will you be okay here alone?"

"Make noise if needed." She showed Ambrena two pieces of attached metal that could be shaken together.

There was no sign of anthills or deadly bugs. Without cut grass, Yall didn't have an adjustable sleeping mat. Or, a cover to protect

her from the sun. Ambrena helped Yall to shift as comfortable as she could be out in the open.

Xile passed by the fire pit with the elephants and shouted. "Leave her now."

Ambrena glanced at Marken and hurried to join the others in the pit.

Digging through the rubble was exhausting. In fact, Ambrena had rarely dug. She had helped Rusty sort when Zella and Tanna could spare her from herb collection.

"We'll need water to loosen the soil," Rusty said.

"There aren't enough people." Vendon gripped his spear and pointed it at her.

"My blade is breaking. We can't dig ground this dry."

Vendon sighed. "Okay. Xile, take two of the elephants for water. I'll be watching you four."

Rusty's blade barely scratched the surface. Even below the surface, where it should be damp, the ground was as hard as the rocks surrounding the elephants.

Ambrena glanced up at the cloudless sky. Would Goddess Amber be watching? Lore said there had once been a way to break the hard ground. It hadn't been easily controlled, and the people lost it. If it were found again, could they control it?

Chapter 20

Corandra and Henry strode through the crowd milling around the fire pit at Shims.

Brael and Quan sat near the fire talking to someone she didn't recognize.

Henry sat beside them and waited patiently.

Corandra closed her eyes and joined him. Waiting wasn't her strong skill. Patience was too close to procrastination.

"Are you sure Lavina?" Quan leaned closer to the unknown woman.

"Calen didn't want to worry everyone. He sent my son this morning as soon as the scouts were back." Lavina braided dried grass stems without glancing at them.

Brael leaned back. "Brix said he thought he saw, or heard something, a few days ago. That's why I insisted he and Jasey go with Ambrena and Rusty."

"They could be in danger," Lavina said.

Quan nodded. "As our ancestors said, trouble comes every generation. I hoped to not live to see another one. Rusty and Ambrena shouldn't have to see another difficult time so soon."

"Please, we have to find them," Corandra said.

Quan touched her hand. "Ah yes, the one whose skill remains unspoken. You will find them, though not alone, I fear."

"Zella and Dover want her to stay in Webbel for the winter," Henry said.

"To Webbel you will go, though not for long. You have had no luck finding your place among the villa of Shells?" Quan's straight back showed no sign of emotion as he spoke.

Corandra shook her head and looked at her lap. "I've a difficult personality. And now, I know why."

He laughed. "That may help us. You will go with Lavina in the morning. Calen will have to bring the entire Webbel villa here. Those we can spare and train quickly will go on to search for Rusty, Ambrena, Brix, and Jasey."

"Everyone is coming here?" Lavina asked.

"Do you have a better solution? We will send runners to Tuttle. Every blanket they have will be needed. Almond's musicians will do

their best to keep our plight out of mind, when it is out sight. Lava will arrive so they can to add new knowledge to our community treasure trove."

"And Shells? There is the nasty sickness." Corandra leaned forward, almost touching Quan's knee.

Quan stirred the embers near him. "Yes, somehow, we must guard them from here, where our medical knowledge and tools are stored."

"The problem is dangerous?" Corandra asked.

"A dream last night, before Rusty and Ambrena left almost made me want to make them stay. Goddess Amber said they must go. Now, it is up to you. If Jasey does not return by morning light, we know something went wrong."

"Come with me," Brael said. "You will sleep in my lodge tonight."

Morning dawned with no sign of Jasey. Corandra rolled over and stared at the fire.

Ida, the hunter, knocked beside Brael's entry.

"Come in." Brael stirred the fire to heat water.

She hurried in and sat beside the fire. "Quan said to come straight to you."

Brael dropped the bowl of water. "Is Jasey hurt?"

"Someone is. Wenda and I followed their tracks. Elephants and footwear we don't recognize. Not sure how many. And blood. Someone was hurt. We found a wrapping, so we know Ambrena helped whoever was hurt."

It was all her fault! Now they would send her away for sure, once the trouble was past. Corandra groaned.

"Corandra, Henry, wake up. Bring your horse and camel. You must go with Lavina immediately. Return before sundown." Brael gathered supplies to add to their huntboards, and prepare for tracking down the missing group.

Corandra grabbed a piece of dried meat. Not much of a meal to run on. She had never been to Webbel. A new trail through land she had never seen should have been fun and relaxing, pointing out features and animals. Instead, it was hurried. The trail looked like every other trail she had been on, with no distinguishing markers.

They reached Webbel closer to midday than midmorning. The villa was in an uproar. Dogs barked. Chickens cackled and flew out of the way of running children. People ran from lodge to lodge, as they carried piles that hid their faces, and dropped furs and other belongings on the ground near the villa treasury.

Calen was the lone steady and quiet person, standing tall among the sea of running people, barking dogs, and flapping chickens. "Hurry. We must leave soon."

Lavina added more items to her gatherboard from her own lodge. She packed it so full Corandra wasn't sure how she would be able to carry all the weight.

The three sat with Calen outside the treasury to eat a quick meal of dried meat while the people loaded the few horses they had with everything they couldn't carry themselves.

"Two of our hunters found trouble this morning. Snares broken. Elephant tracks. Horses in the herd lodge neighed and reared in fright waking us all before morning's light."

"Anything else?" Lavina asked.

Calen shook his head. "We have no camels. Every person will carry as much as they can. I am afraid we may not be able to return. It seems we ever suffer from the fault of those dark days."

"It's my fault," Corandra said. "The Goddesses are angry with me because of who I am. I should never have been allowed to live."

Calen stared at her.

She blushed and ran to Ellie.

A barking dog startled the camel.

Henry joined her and helped the people of Webbel load even more onto the horses.

Calen tied handles for tools onto Ellie's back.

Corandra would ride and watch after the small children. Or, at least Calen had asked her to. It was the least she could do after all the problems she had caused.

At last, Calen led the group toward Shims.

Abandoned chickens cackled and roosted in open lodges.

Dogs loped along behind the people, pushing the children as close to the horses as was safe.

Corandra could run far faster on Ellie than the horses around her. Ellie could skim through the trails, or off to the side to watch for

danger. Turning the camel around, she raced back to the villa, and through it, to the horse lodges.

Beyond, were the trampled spaces the elephants had made nearby. Some prints were large, and far apart. Others were deeper, as if the animals had stood still for a long while. Something glistened in one of the footprints.

Corandra picked it up. It was different, not something she recognized. Rusty would know what the shiny object was. It vaguely resembled some objects in the sort baskets.

A lion roared in the distance.

Ellie raced back to catch up with the people of Webbel. No children struggled with the walk at the back of the line. Families usually walked to the trades meetings, though they were never this bowed down with weight and belongings. It wouldn't be long before there would be stragglers.

Henry waved to her to wait.

She hurried on ahead to look for more evidence of the elephants along the path's edge.

At one clearing, she pushed Ellie out to the east. Hunter's horse trails would circle back to Shims. Those trails would be a good place to search for the elephants. If the elephants were a loose herd, they'd be long gone. If people were with them, they might have left more artifacts that Zella, or Dover, could identify.

Pushing on, she reached a small clump of bushes. Elephant tracks and the tracks of people mingled here. She wasn't as good a tracker as Henry, so reading them took a while. Even after looking closely, she couldn't tell how many people or elephants had stayed here, or exactly when.

A rabbit startled Ellie, and they hurried back to catch up with the group of people walking to Shims.

By nightfall, the subdued group trudged to the Shims' fire pit. Many children stumbled along, and adults had to grab them, to keep them from falling into the fire.

Quan and Brael waited for the group to eat.

"You ran off on your own, didn't you?" Quan said.

Corandra nodded. "I had to know."

"What did you find?"

She held out the shiny object, now dull in the darkness.

Quan took it, looked at it, and handed it back. "How many do you think there are?"

"I don't think there are too many. However, there may be more than one group. I saw two places where they had stayed."

Corandra put the object back in her gatherboard.

Quan waited. "Are you going after Rusty and Ambrena?"

"Of course. I will leave in the morning. You can't stop me."

A dog sniffed and settled at his feet.

"No, I suppose not. However, Jasey has not returned. You could be hurt, killed, or worse. Are you sure you want to go alone?"

Corandra gulped. What he left unsaid was frightening. What had been done to her mother, could be done to her. And, may have already been done to those she must find. "I don't want to go alone. I have to save Rusty and Ambrena from becoming like Uden."

The fire spread a warmth through her she didn't recognize.

Quan held out his hand. "Would you humor an old man?"

She stared at him. What did he mean?

"Wait until we have enough people to go safely with you. We can send part of Shims, and most of Webbel, day after tomorrow. Almond, Tuttle, and Lava will be here as well, and can send help. Every hunter, and most who can hold a spear, or throw a stone."

The fire crackled and a child called out for his mother nearby.

"I don't want to wait. It may be too late."

Quan closed his eyes. "Young woman, we need you to lead the people who go."

"No one would follow me." Corandra laughed.

Henry sat beside her, and handed her some water. "You'd be surprised."

Lavina held out her hand. "We need you Corandra. The rest of us." She shook her head and sighed. "We're too nice sometimes. You tell it like it is, a breath of fresh air. May be what we need to save us all."

"I argue with everyone."

"And we may need that," Lavina said.

"They'll run from me." Corandra pulled away.

"Hopefully, you can make the people on the elephants run from Rusty, Ambrena, Brix, and Jasey," Henry said. "You can track almost as well as I can."

"If I could keep my mouth shut, right?"

He groaned.

Lavina laughed.

"Some will stay here to protect Shims, though?" She didn't want to stay behind to protect the villa of old and young.

Quan nodded. "Most your age will. Now rest. You'll need your strength tomorrow."

Chapter 21

The pit mine had steep sloping sides. It was at least two people deep. Shelpit had been dug at, or near ground level, with dirt refilling the holes. It reminded Rusty of the tales of Westpit. Not a place with good memories, though the memories were not hers.

Tanna had once told her of how they had dug there. Their style had been different, though the miners who survived had never questioned Zella or Rusty about the difference of techniques. If she had asked, she might have learned something useful. Perhaps much of the ancient's knowledge was lost that way, simply from not passing something on to the next person. As the lead pit miner, she should have asked, especially as the concern grew that Shelpit was nearly empty. Perhaps, even now, Zella would think to ask a few of the survivors. Even if it did stir up painful memories.

"What you staring at?" Vendon asked.

Rusty jumped. "Trying to remember another way to dig in dry ground."

"Xile is back with the water. If you think of something, let me know."

Xile walked the elephants up to the edge of the pit. Another elephant came behind, and tipped the bucket over. Water sloshed down the sides, and covered part of the bottom.

"I can't send the bucket down, it's too heavy." Xile laughed as the water splashed Rusty in her face.

She wiped her forehead and walked over to the edge of the wet area. "Show me how you did that again, using the empty bucket."

Xile grinned. "Sure."

The elephant pushed on the now empty bucket, and it thumped on its side, releasing a trickle of water.

Rusty wet her digging tool, and stuck it in the now damp dirt. Something about the bucket tip was familiar. A memory so old, she couldn't name it, nagged at her. Trying to latch on to it wouldn't help.

"Here." Ambrena slid down the slope followed by Marken.

"How is Yall?"

"She's as okay as she can be, I guess. Any idea where to start?" Ambrena sat her gatherboard against one wall of the pit.

"I wish we knew what we are looking for. If we did, it would make it easier." Rusty scraped the ground.

Brix and Jasey worked nearby. Setting snares, pit traps, and even baking pits had required them to scratch the surface of digging. Searching for objects had never been something they had concerned themselves with. Though, of course, like everyone else, they knew how to recognize something that may hold potential for a miner to verify what it was.

A butterfly laugh tickled her throat at their attempts to delicately dig and watch for something unique. The ground loosened and she focused on her digging, trying to find something worthwhile.

Vendon, Marken, and Xile joined them, digging nearby.

The ground turned up little in the way of useful objects. Pebbles and tiny bits of broken green glass-like substances were plentiful. Nothing solid or whole to be found. While working and filling her basket in silence, she tried to determine what about the way Xile watered the ground evoked a memory. It wasn't one of fear, so much as one before fear.

Vendon and Xile joked and laughed as they dug in the ground.

Their sideways glances at Ambrena made Rusty shiver.

She had to ask what artifacts they were digging for. "What have you found here in the past?"

Vendon grunted. "Our ancestors found green glass and metal. We need a lot of metal for our boats."

Rusty crawled to one of the pit walls. It was deeper than any of them were tall. The sides of the wall reminded her of a woven blanket from Tuttle. Shaded lines consistently level, except in one place. There the layers seemed to rise. One layer was a hand's width above its matching color. Orangey shades leaked from the top of the mine, toward the bottom. As if rain had washed a turned over blanket dye bucket down the sides.

The search for glass and metal would be different from the search for paper. Shelpit had been known for paper, plastic, and metal. Paper had disappeared long ago. Scraps of metal and plastic were left. No pieces big enough to make anything they needed.

It could be the same here. Wherever here was. The metal scoop she had loaned Corandra that day was already turning the same

orange color as parts of the wall. Before long, it would melt into nothingness. Secrets of how the ancients kept metal useable above the surface of the ground had long vanished. They would have to learn how to make metal on their own, and how to save it, or soon have to learn new ways to make tools.

She sat back on her feet. If all the mines were empty, she'd lose her place in Shells. Even Zella and Tanna would no longer have a valued skill, other than healing. Though no one would make Zella leave. And Tanna could do so much more than lead the mine.

"Why aren't you digging?" Vendon scowled at her.

Rusty jumped. "Trying to find a spot that is certain to contain artifacts. I don't see any."

Vendon's face turned red. "You'll find one, if I have to stand over you and make you!"

The elephants above the pit trumpeted and squirted water on the group at the bottom. They turned and sprinted off.

Xile raced up the incline after them.

Vendon glared at her. "Girl, find the artifacts now!"

Rusty bent toward the ground. Her eyes stung with tears. If he knew there were things in the ground, he should be able to find them. How did he expect her to do what he couldn't?

Xile returned, red in the face. "I put them back in the herd lodge."

Vendon grunted and glared at Rusty.

Her metal piece bent under the strain of the dry ground. A piece of green glass embedded in the dirt gave some promise of hope. She worked on releasing it until sweat poured down her forehead. At last, it popped out of the ground, a round piece, a little bigger than a pea.

Brix smiled and handed her another piece, almost identical, to add to the bucket of found items. Inside the bucket were several pea-sized pieces of glass. No metal at all. Jasey dropped in a dark brown piece questioningly. She'd look at it closer later. Probably an old piece of wood. Perhaps it would have some kind of writing on it.

She passed the bucket back to Vendon.

There was nothing he could say. They were digging where he had said to dig. He sat it down and glared at the wall.

"I need to check on Yall," Ambrena said. "May Rusty come with me?"

Rusty looked up at Vendon.

He scowled. "Go ahead. We'll all take a break. Marken can prepare the fire for a meal. I had hoped for more today."

"Don't go far!" Xile said.

"They can't go without their horses." Marken lifted the almost empty gathering bucket.

"We don't even need the elephants for today's finds," Vendon said.

"It was only part of a day," Rusty said. "I need to look for a stone for another tool. One that is sharper than my rotting metal." She pulled her gatherboard onto her back and climbed out of the pit behind the others. A glance back didn't reveal anything helpful.

She followed Ambrena to where Yall rested in the shade on the huntboard Marken had left her on.

"I'm going around the brush here, to find loose firewood." Rusty said.

Ambrena nodded and checked Yall's forehead. "She's warm, not too bad though."

Brix and Jasey walked up as she finished speaking. "We'll carry her to the fire, and then come back to help."

Rusty walked around the brush. A tree had fallen in the not so distant past. She pushed through the branches, and wiggled her way into the depths to be alone.

Most dense growth areas away from Lake Kafa were small, a little larger than two lodges together. This one appeared far larger. A trail wide enough for a fox led further into the undergrowth. Excitement tingled up and down her spine at what might be hidden among the bushes. Pushing through another viney tangle, she found a small clearing around a tumble down mini-lodge.

It couldn't be a lodge, it was too small, and too hidden. Walls were so vine covered, she couldn't determine if they were made of trees, blankets, or stone. The roof didn't look right either. It had four slopes, instead of being a round slope. Shimmers and rainbows glowed under the overgrowth on the roof.

Rusty dropped the twigs she had collected. She stepped up to the entry. Inside it was dark. A light flickered along the wall at the back.

"Rusty, where are you?" Ambrena said.

"Be right there!" She stepped back. If she could share this with Ambrena, and no one else, it would be like a secret lodge from childhood dreams.

Who knew what might be lurking inside.

Chapter 22

No visible blood on Yall's pale face.

Ambrena wasn't sure how long she could hold on. If Brael, or Dover, were there, they'd know more than she did. Watching Zande die had been awful, though even Dover and Zella couldn't help him. Her inability to save a second person so soon after the first, and one who might die of physical injuries, would have serious consequences. No one in the villas would trust her medical skills, the only skill she had trained for.

Rusty walked away from Yall, and around the brush pile. So much depended on Rusty, and her ability to find artifacts. If the Goddesses would give her the answers they needed, Ambrena could focus on healing Yall, if she could be healed.

Jasey sat beside Yall. He gently rubbed her face, much as he would touch a newborn puppy.

Brix called her to the side. "Jasey can't leave until we are safe. He may try to go tomorrow night. They know something is wrong, since he isn't back by now. Go help Rusty, and hurry back to the campsite." He walked back to Jasey and helped pick up the huntboard Yall was tied to.

The small animal trail Rusty had followed was a mess. Ambrena pushed through the tangled undergrowth and tripped over loose roots. She picked up a few small branches to carry back for firewood. "Rusty, where are you?"

"Be right there!"

Several small branches covered the ground near a log big enough to sit on. They were perfect for firewood. She picked one up and touched each of the others to be sure they weren't snakes before adding them to the pile in her arms.

The brush moved and Rusty joined her. "Are you alone?"

Ambrena nodded.

Rusty held her finger to her lips. "Found something, follow me." She pushed back through the tangled branches.

The pile of sticks for firewood tumbled to the ground.

Spider webs clung to the sides of the tangled path. Some of the spider bodies were as big as a section of her thumb, and waved their arms at her as she brushed by. Strands of web broke and

tangled in her hair. Dense undergrowth like this was something she had never seen around Shells. The trail clearers kept the spider webs back off the main walkways. The mini-lodge in the clearing was a breath of fresh air. "We can't stay long," she whispered.

Rusty nodded and stepped inside the entry with a stick in hand to deter snakes and small creatures.

"Can you see anything?" The bright sky above let in some light through the entry.

"No. There was a flashing spot earlier. Can't find it now."

Something tumbled inside the lodge.

"A rat nest, I think. There are boxes in here, like things Zella talked about, and Dover as well. I'm coming out." Rusty stepped out covered in cobwebs. "Not sure what all I saw. I wish we could explore here, and find out what this place was used for."

Rusty led the way back through the brush.

Good thing she did. Ambrena would have been lost. When they reached her stack of twigs, she picked them up. "What an exciting place. Do you think they know about it?"

"Not likely. If they do, they don't know what is there. Too many spiders to be frequently used. And yet, that floor is clearer than I would expect."

Stars shone on them as they walked back to camp. Thoughts swirled. Rusty would be excited by the find of a hidden lodge. She should be as well, though all she could think of was the dangers of spider or snake bites.

Ambrena checked on Yall. Her skin was clammy, and her eyes remained closed. She didn't respond to Ambrena's touch.

Marken glanced at her, and then away.

Elephants trumpeted as Xile led them back to the elephant lodge from the watering pond.

Marken beckoned, to beyond the fire. "The man and boy with you went to water the horses. She won't live till morning, will she?"

"I'm afraid not. I don't know anything to help, or if anyone we know would know anything to help her. We were sent to find help for illness in our own villa." Ambrena blinked.

He closed his eyes, put his hands in his lap, and nodded. "She wanted me to sponsor her first child. I don't want her to die this way."

"There are no words of comfort I know. Don't be bitter from this." Ambrena reached out and patted his shoulder.

He clasped his hands. "I won't be like Xile. I will be sad. At least a young woman wanted me while I was young."

His head drooped, and his body shuddered, as he tried to hide the tears.

He needed an opportunity to grieve.

Ambrena walked back to her gatherboard, and picked out a pretty piece of yellow cloth. It was the only way she had to lend her comfort to him. Holding it close, she thought about its true significance in Shells. Perhaps, Marken wouldn't know its intended meaning. He hadn't moved. The yellow blended with his grey clothes when she placed the strap on his leg. It would be something for him to hold on to when Yall was no longer there.

Dried meat would make a simple crunchy soup. She broke the meat into the water bucket, and added vegetables and calming herbs. If Marken asked her what the piece of weaving meant in her villa, she would tell him. If he asked her to follow through on its promise, she didn't know if she could. Yall might be happy with the decision, or appalled. Their society might see Ambrena as a proper alternate, or they might not. She'd have to ask. Rusty would never even consider it.

Rusty glanced at her wordlessly. She knew what it meant in Shells. Would she realize it meant something different in this context?

Marken held the strip close. He did not tie it around his arm or leg to signify his feelings.

She sighed. Hopefully, he understood it was meant as a gift of peace.

The evening wore on. Mealtime was silent, except for the slurping of soup.

Yall did not wake up.

Ambrena tried to help her to sip some broth, even in her sleep. No luck.

Now, she almost feared Marken. Her stomach leapt when he came near. Warmth and confusion flooded her normal concentration.

Rusty covered her mouth, as her eyes sparkled in the firelight.

Brix and Jasey looked from one to the other, trying to figure out what had happened. They lifted their bowls to drain them. Brix did not even try to speak.

"Did Yall wake up?" Vendon asked.

Ambrena shook her head.

Before they slept for the night, Marken arranged Yall between him and her. Together, they would watch her and comfort her until she died.

Ambrena drifted in and out of sleep, afraid of what the three men might do to both the young women, and the boy, if Yall died. If Marken were on their side, he and Brix might be able to stand up against Vendon and Xile.

Rusty and Ambrena had no weapons, or training on how to use one. It was something they had never thought of in Shells. After the dark days, no one wanted to use weapons. Perhaps, that was a dangerous oversight. After all, it meant they relied on hunters, or third and fourth gen adults, to protect the villa if lions, or roamers, came around. She missed having her dog Kara with her. If she hadn't been ready to have puppies any day, she would have come along as some form of protection.

She rolled over and grasped Yall's hand. She had not been able to ask her so many important questions.

As the moon reached its height, Yall shuddered.

Ambrena's hand drifted to Yall's chest, and touched Marken's as his did the same. Her heart leapt in a way she had never known. She sat up and checked for Yall's pulse.

There was none.

Firelight flickered gently on her face, and Marken's, as he leaned over Yall's still body, no longer in pain. Tears glistened on his cheek, and slipped down his nose, onto her now bare chest.

Ambrena didn't want to wake everyone. Let him be alone with the young woman who had wanted to give him so much more than she had been able to.

She pulled back and stirred up the fire. What were Kees' death and burial rituals? Zande had been cremated, and his ashes floated on Lake Kafa. That was what they did when a person died from illness. And sometimes, those who died of old age or injury.

Vendon stumbled around the fire. "Yall?"

Ambrena lowered her head. Not before seeing the pain etched on his face in the flickering firelight. He would miss his sister, though of course, no one could know.

The fire cackled, ignoring the plight of the small group gathered around it.

"We must prepare her for burial," Vendon said.

Chapter 23

The villa of Shims overflowed with people as Tuttle and Webbel found places to stow their belongings. Children yelled. Dogs barked louder than a normal Fall or Spring Trade. Somehow, the small villa seemed to have more people than Corandra had ever seen, even though the villa of Shells was not there. Or, maybe, because they weren't.

Ellie tried to pull away from Corandra, eager to be alone in quiet. With this many people, Shims would be a seething pot of frustration for everyone. As for herself, she could hardly expect to control her own emotions as toddlers and dogs raced around between people's legs, in front of them, and tripped several of the adults.

"Corandra!" Henry shouted. "Wait for me." A spear and several unprepared spear shafts waved as he ran toward her. He struggled to catch his breath. A small child nearly toppled him, as he stopped in front of her. "We're going to a clearing with several of the adults to train them how to use the spears. Many don't know how."

"I thought everyone learned how to use a spear when they became an adult."

Henry leaned on the spear shaft as a cane. "Most do. However, those in Webbel banned themselves from using them for two generations. Many, especially in Shells, never learned. Others have long forgotten how."

Corandra held Ellie steady. "Webbel have hunters."

"Yes, they have hunters who come from other villas." Ida said. A covered basket on her back hung low. "Even though the Webbel adults still make the tools, they do not allow themselves to use them. Their decision. Not a punishment that Dover, or Zella, or anyone else requested."

"Where are we going?" Corandra asked.

"I'll lead the way," Ida said. "It isn't far. We will still be able to hear the children." She glanced toward a running toddler who crossed her path.

"You don't think there's any danger. Do you?" Henry asked.

Ida put her finger to her mouth, and didn't say another word as she led the way out of Shims' villa.

Once out of sight of the children she turned to Henry. "Whether the danger is real, or imagined, many adults fear a return to those dark days. Except, we don't know who the roamers are. Or, why they attacked Rusty, Ambrena, Brix, and Jasey."

"We should know our neighbors better," Henry said.

"It was Tanna and Robin's dream. I fear after this; we will know them all too well. We may not like what we learn about them." Ida's voice quavered. She pushed aside a curtain of vines.

The clearing was empty, except for Quan and Wenda, who rested on a stone bench at the far end. Quan waved to them.

Corandra turned Ellie loose to graze. "Are we really going to train people who don't know how to use spears?"

"The danger is worse than you realize. Many of our scouts have seen signs of horses, camels, and many elephants." Quan watched Ellie grazing in the clearing.

"How can you be sure the horses and camels don't belong to one of our villas?" Corandra fingered her gatherboard.

"The footprints show them galloping away," Quan said. "And we found this."

He held up a halter unlike any Corandra had seen. The halter wasn't cowhide, or horsehide. Colored stones glittered across it. Her fingers hesitated, as she reached to touch it. She pulled her hand back, and sat down.

"The stones are similar to the one I found."

Quan turned the halter and a place big enough for three missing stones showed. "You found one of the missing stones. The other two are out there, somewhere."

"It's torn. The halter and stones may have been lost in a fight." Henry touched the halter.

"We don't break things when we fight." Corandra touched his hand.

"Verbal fights can lead to physical fights, as the animals we hunt." Henry pulled away.

"Our ancestor's tales don't tell us how the physical fights began," Quan said. "We can only guess."

"I don't want to be the cause," Corandra said. "Let me leave, and they'll leave you alone."

"I think you were right last night when you said there may be more than one group of people watching our villas. It seems the group with the elephants have split off from those with horses and camels." Quan sat the halter beside him.

"That would mean they would fight amongst themselves, wouldn't it?" Henry said.

Quan's wrinkled fingers traced a line on the halter. "We can hope. I wish I felt sure of that. However, it appears they have come separately, and to different places. Their tracks have been seen at Lava, and Tuttle, as well."

"So are we preparing for a battle on two fronts?" Corandra said.

Quan nodded. "Best to be prepared. When Lava arrives, we'll know more."

Adults entered the clearing. A few walked empty handed and slow, as if they were not sure where to go. Others strode in purposely, carrying spears. Some whispered to each other, while others stood still, waiting on someone to tell them what to do.

Corandra silently groaned. No surprise they were afraid. If she were an untrained one, she would have walked into the clearing, taken a spear from one of the people with extras, and demanded training at once. Not one of them did.

A basket of spears passed through the vine-clad entrance, followed by Lavina. "Line up everyone, and face the villa we must protect."

Wenda and Ida joined Lavina to prepare everyone for the spear training challenge.

Corandra sat on the bench beside Quan. She knew how to throw a spear, thanks to Henry. Not enough to train anyone else. Once she saw how others did, she could compete, to see who could throw the most distance, and most accurate.

Quan stood up to address the crowd milling about. "My fellow Pit Miners we're not sure what danger is out there. Living memory has not given us such events as have occurred recently. We do not know what will happen. There may be one group, or two. Four members of our villas are missing. These roamers are not random roamers. This is not two young adults willfully choosing to leave the safety of their villas. Practice today for your safety, and ours."

Her face reddened. Corandra thought of her own journey, and return, not so long ago. No, Ambrena and Rusty would never choose to go off on their own.

"Watch them closely. You will choose who will go with you, and who will stay to guard us." Quan sat down beside Corandra.

Wenda, Ida, and Lavina set up practice targets. The people moved around, forming lines, and practiced balancing their spears.

"Won't we all be together?" Corandra squeezed the rock in her hand.

"Look at the number of people. Do you honestly think you can speak loud enough to be heard by nearly sixty people at once? Or see the hunting signs?" Quan placed the halter beside her.

A woman threw a spear. Instead of going toward the target, it went straight up, and then back down a few feet in front of her.

"And not give your position away." Henry sat down beside them. "Besides, only some will be able to throw accurately. Others will be able to aim and scare off intruders. We need an even split here, and on the trail."

"I wish Zella and Tanna were here. They managed to protect us during Blake's troubled days. Do you know how Quan?"

He shook his head. "No, I wasn't with them. I wish I had been. Now, we can't wait to learn their knowledge. I wouldn't want to add to their worries. They have enough to be concerned about."

Ida, Wenda, and Lavina attempted to train the unaccustomed people how to use spears. If it weren't so serious, it would've almost been funny. Some of the spears rose up in the air well over the targets. Others went around the targets, and stuck in the brush toward Shims.

When one woman from Webbel aimed her spear, it went straight into the ground. Almost in front of her. She would trip and fall over it, stand up, and try again. Ida worked with her, trying to improve her release at the right position. Finally, she took the spear and gave it to another person to try.

Ida didn't give up working with the woman though. She left the clearing, and returned, carrying a round wooden ball. She handed the object to the woman. "I know you play some of the games. Try rolling this toward the target. You won't be able to hit a person in the

chest with this ball. It's heavy enough to knock a person down. Particularly if they aren't looking for something coming at their feet."

The woman laughed. "I do like to play the games, don't I? Let's try it."

She took the ball, lined up to the target, took two steps forward, and released the ball.

Corandra watched her carefully. Throwing a ball instead of a spear was unexpected, and unpredictable.

The ball rolled straight to the brushy target.

Quiet spread as the ball rolled.

It picked up speed. On contact, the target shuddered and tumbled. The single twig that held it snapped.

People cheered.

"I wouldn't want to be in the way of that throw," echoed across the clearing.

"Now let's try something less certain to fall over," Ida said.

She ran to the brush pile, and took two good-sized sticks, and pushed them in the ground.

The woman rolled the ball again. Both sticks broke off at the ground.

Corandra clapped her hands and cheered.

The day continued. People practiced and learned whatever skills of throwing they could master. All of them could have mastered spear throwing, or ball throwing, in a season. They had to use what they could learn in the one day.

"Who will you choose?" Quan said.

Corandra looked around the group of eager faces. "I don't know. Most of these people think of me as obnoxious. In fact, most people stay away from me. I know I'm not a nice person. I want to be better, I really do. If Ida, Wenda, and Lavina will help me, I would prefer they lead the groups."

Ida and Wenda looked at each other, and back to Corandra seated beside Quan on the bench. "We will try."

Lavina tapped her spear on the ground and said, "I will try to work with Corandra. We will go ahead and separate our groups and choose who we want to work with."

Lavina, Wenda, and Ida walked back into the crowd. Most stayed with their villa group. Ida took most of the Tuttle people.

Wenda chose those from Almond, and Ida chose mostly Lava members. Brael would lead the Shims' villa in any fight.

People waited, unmoving in their groups.

Corandra glanced around and noticed they were all watching her. She glanced at Quan, who nodded. "We will all," her voice croaked. That would never do. "We will begin in the morning before the first light of day. Meet at the fire pit."

Of course, most of them were probably sleeping around the fire anyway.

Sleepy children would watch as the adults walked out into an unknown future. This opportunity to lead had to be done correctly, or Zella would never forgive her if she forgot the proper ceremonies.

Henry too would be watching.

Corandra gulped. It might be her last chance. Spear lifted, she walked through the parting crowd, and back to Shims.

Chapter 24

Rusty woke to Ambrena crying softly by her side, and Yall's body glistening in the flickering firelight. She reached over and patted Ambrena's knee. "Did you sleep at all?"

"Yall will be buried today. I don't know where." She wiped away the tears.

Marken sat up beside her. "I've never known anyone to die here, so I have no idea."

"Are Vendon and Xile awake?" Rusty peered over the fire.

"They went to see what tools we have to bury her. We usually bury in the river, and it's not possible here."

"Do you mind if we talk about something else?" Rusty asked. Memories of the Kafa Goddess and Blake came unbidden. She hadn't been there when Blake was swallowed. The tale was a common one used to convince children to be good throughout the villa. Zande had even heard it from her once, when he refused to clean up a mess he had made. It hadn't seemed real; the day she repeated it. Now, it felt very real.

Marken placed his hand beside Yall. "I can tell you more when you tell me what's on your mind."

"Do the people from Kees explore much here? Is digging all they do here?" Rusty shook her head to clear the images of giant water monsters. The mini-lodge, and whether Vendon and Xile knew about it, was what mattered now.

He laughed gently. "Digging is their primary reason for coming. They stay out of the bushes and dense undergrowth. People from Kees prefer the open places, and water. I'm not originally from Kees. I came from further down the river, on the east bank."

Rusty picked up a stick and drew absentmindedly in the dirt. "We found something yesterday, while Brix and Jasey brought Yall over here."

"Figured you found it. I don't think anyone from Kees has ever been back in that brush. Maybe many generations ago; before the brush grew so deep. I saw it last fall, and enjoyed the place to sit peacefully and quietly in the evening. Yall went with me twice."

"I want to explore it," Rusty said. "If Vendon would allow us to."

Brix and Jasey crawled over to join them.

Marken glanced at them and back to her. "He might allow you to, if he doesn't know what you're doing. With the funeral preparations this morning, you might be able to. I'm not sure what his plan is. We can't bury her in the watering hole. While there are plenty of watering holes around, we wouldn't want her body to stay in one place forever. It should flow to the sea. It would be two days to take her to the river, and two days back."

An elephant trumpeted.

Vendon wouldn't knowingly allow them to explore. Marken was right. They would have to find artifacts for Vendon; and soon if they wanted any hope of returning to Shells before winter.

"Are you all awake and ready to start the day?" Vendon strode back into the circle of firelight.

"We're awake," Marken said.

"Good. I trust Rusty has a plan for digging today, as soon as Yall is buried."

"No plan. Where will she be buried?"

Vendon snarled. "That is none of your business, or Marken's. You will go with Marken and stay with him until we call for you. Xile and I will see to Yall's burial. See if you find anything in that pit we dug in yesterday. Don't you dare run away either."

Rusty fought back a grin. Of course. They wouldn't be expected to be at her funeral. Perhaps it was better if they didn't know where she was buried. Vendon and Xile wouldn't treat her with the respect Marken, or even Brix and Jasey would.

Marken gasped. "She chose me."

"You did not give her a child. She wasn't ready. You may leave her something to remember you by in the afterlife."

Marken reached into his gatherboard and pulled out a tiny, shiny, clear object. He took her left hand, wrapped it around the object, kissed it, and rested it on her chest. He placed a dried four-leaf clover under her hand. A tear dropped on her forehead.

He struggled to speak as he picked up his gatherboard. "Come on, we will go discuss a dig plan near the brush pile where Yall waited yesterday."

Rusty patted Yall's hand, and then picked up her gatherboard to follow behind Marken. Ambrena, Brix, and Jasey would do the same. They did not glance back. Perhaps it was better not to know.

Yall's death had given them a chance, one they could not waste. Her sacrifice would bring hope to more than one community.

Marken led them to the place where Yall had stayed the day before.

A giggle snuck up on Rusty. It was wrong to laugh after a death, even though she was thankful it gave them an opportunity they would not have had otherwise. They walked around to the side where the path snuck into the undergrowth.

Vendon and Xile couldn't see them.

Rusty rested her gatherboard against a tree. "It's in there, we can find it."

Marken nodded. "Rusty don't be afraid to laugh. I can tell you wanted to, when you thought that we would have a chance to explore. I want to know what it is to, and maybe it can help us."

"What is it?" Brix asked.

"I didn't have a chance to tell you about the mini-lodge we found," Ambrena said. "We aren't sure what it is, or was. We better hurry."

Rusty pushed through the underbrush. Footprints from the day before led them along the trail.

Marken followed and brushed the footprints away with twigs, so Vendon and Xile couldn't sneak up on them easily.

Vines covered the walls of the lodge. Everything appeared as untouched as the previous day. A squirrel chattered at them from the roof and bounced back into the brush canopy.

Brix walked up to the entry. "Are you sure it's safe?"

"I went in yesterday. Do you think we can cut down some of the vines? At least over the windsun."

Brix fingered the stone walls. "It might make it weak. Wouldn't want it to tumble. Where is the windsun?"

"Almost opposite the entry." Rusty looked around for a loose cutting stone.

"I found a stone that will work." Brix went on around the corner of the lodge with Jasey.

Marken pointed to the roof. "That material on the top looks similar to the glass Kees uses to grow their food."

There were plenty of vines across the material, whatever it was. Once the vines were off, Marken would know if it was the same.

"How does the glass help you grow food?" Ambrena asked.

Marken pointed a stick at the roof. "It's always warm underneath the cover. During the summer, it's too hot to grow anything. During the winter, the vegetables grow perfect."

"If he has searched for it so long before, doesn't Vendon have enough glass?" Rusty asked.

"We always lose some. It breaks and shatters so easy. We also have to find metal to make the pieces that are melted to prepare the parts that move the boats through the water."

"What are they called?" Ambrena asked.

Marken grinned. "I never asked, and no one said. My villa uses different terms than Kees does. As a gardener who likes to trade with the boating people, I didn't learn the boat terminology. I think they are the part called a prop in my villa, though I can't be sure. All those words run together to me. Especially since I hear similar parts called a dozen names from the trade groups."

The noise on the other side of the lodge stopped. Brix and Jasey trudged back to where they stood, stamping a pathway through the vines around the mini-lodge. "Rusty, you can go in. Be careful."

She picked up a stick and walked in the entryway. Once again, something flickered on the other side. Almost as if it was a warning, or maybe something the ancients wanted her to find.

The light through the entry and windsun wasn't enough. "Brix, can you trim the roof vines please?"

"We can cut off the vines, and maybe pull them to the side a little. It might weaken the walls. Stay outside while we do so." Brix waited until she and Ambrena were as far away from the mini-lodge as they could be in the tiny clearing.

Brix used the stone to cut the vines close to the roof. He took a branch and pulled them over to one side. Dirt and dust tumbled to the ground.

Marken stepped forward to look at the unusual roof. "It does look a lot like our garden plots, I wonder if this was used as an example. You should have plenty of daylight now."

Rusty stepped inside. Sunlight didn't come through the roof as Marken thought it would. It did come through the uncovered

windsun. There didn't appear to be any small creatures living inside. However, there were plenty of leaves and dirt.

Along one wall, a dusty wooden table teetered. Underneath was a large plastic box, with a lid that hung loosely on one side. Above, on the right side three plastic pieces; a square, a rectangle, and an oval, covered the dusty board. A tall plastic square on the left side of the table was the one that interested Rusty. Where it sat was where she had seen the flickering the day before, and a little while ago. She walked over and touched it. It gleamed and felt moist.

A bird fluttered in the entryway and landed next to the square box on the table. It startled Rusty, and she jumped backwards, almost falling.

"Be careful." Brix watched from the entry.

Rusty sat down next to the box under the table, careful to not touch the leaning table above her. There didn't appear to be much in there, mostly tattered remains of paper. Odd place for it to have survived. It appeared as if several creatures had used this box as a nest over the gens. Brittle plastic cracked at her touch. Crumbled dusty paper slid out onto the dry dirt floor.

A flickering from the tall square on the table distracted her from the box in front of her. What could it be? She rose up on her knees to look at it.

The tall thin box glimmered in the light from the windsun. It reminded her of lightning high in the clouds, not a true flash, more of subtle coverage. A long, flat, narrow piece was black, with a green speck peeking out of one corner. The oval and the long piece were attached to a large square behind them. They were not as dusty as the table. Rusty leaned closer to observe it. A faint hum seemed to come from the square. Strange. Her heart fluttered as she remembered the plastic talking piece Blake had found.

Another flicker from the tall square disturbed her. Rusty touched the tall square to rub the dust off.

Ambrena, Brix, and Jasey walked in.

"What is it?" Ambrena asked.

"I don't know. Marken do you know?" She turned to the entry where Marken stood.

He shook his head and stepped into the mini-lodge. "I've never seen anything like it other than here. I didn't stay inside long last fall

when I came. I'd sit outside and listen to the birds and the squirrels."

"I'll see if I can pull this hand sized piece away. If we can wipe the dust off of it, we might be able to figure out what it is." Rusty tried to pull it away from the square. It wouldn't move far. Two ropes attached it to the other pieces.

"I'll have to wipe them carefully," she said. She rubbed more dust off, and began to recognize letters. Letters that Zella had taught them. They were barely visible in the dim light.

She pointed to the letters and read them aloud, "Q, W, E, R, and they go on. That isn't a word, is it? Are they some kind of secret code?" Rusty glanced back at Ambrena and the men.

"No idea." Marken said. "I think we better return to the fire pit. Vendon will be looking for us soon. Maybe we can come back this evening."

"Let me look at it," Ambrena said. "I won't be long."

Ambrena stepped up beside Rusty, and looked at the three pieces of plastic. The big one she touched gently. Nothing happened. The flickering continued. She tapped the long thin piece in front of the square, and jumped back. "It wiggled. We better go. I need to think over the lore."

Rusty followed the men out of the lodge. "What do you think it is?"

Ambrena lagged behind. At the entry, she turned and leaned against the wall. "No idea. We'll figure it out."

Chapter 25

Ambrena followed the others out of the lodge. Something nagged at the back of her mind. It had to be important. "Don't say anything to Vendon or Xile, if they don't already know."

"I'm sure they don't." Marken pushed the brush aside in front of her. "There's no reason to think they know. If they did, they'd have taken the glass on the roof back to Kees long ago."

They pushed on through the overgrown vegetation. Their gatherboards waited for them at the edge of the brush pile.

"We should go on to the pit," Rusty said.

Marken shook his head. "We'll go back to the fire and eat before we dig."

When they arrived, Vendon and Xile glared and laughed. "Been off having fun, I see. You couldn't wait until after Yall had been buried, could you?"

Ambrena trembled. If those men had any idea what the piece of material meant that she had given to Marken then they would have reason to believe what Vendon had said. She wanted to scream they were wrong. Her hands clenched. If she told them they were wrong, then they would question where the five had been.

Marken glanced back at her.

She shook her head.

Marken sighed. "A man must leave his grief behind somehow."

Rusty drew her breath in and glanced at Ambrena.

Her heart beat wildly. Could Brix protect her, if Vendon made the decision many roamers would in a circumstance like this?

Vendon laughed. "You aren't a man. Until a woman says a child is sponsored by you and has lived for four seasons, you are not a man, regardless of the customs of the burb you come from."

"We need to work," Xile said. "I'll be keeping my eye on all of you."

Marken gulped and turned toward the pit.

Ambrena tried to relax the tense muscles in her arms and legs. It wasn't easy. A palm-sized rock nearly tripped her.

Rusty stared down at the pit they had worked in the day before. Her toe didn't touch the downward slope.

"Hurry up and climb down here." Vendon shoved a bucket over the edge. It clanged on the bottom and rolled to a stop at Jasey's feet.

"It's empty Vendon. We aren't going to find anything. You know it. What part of this open space hasn't been dug in previous generations?" Rusty placed her hands on her hips.

It was a risk. Pushing him now could be dangerous. Her legs shook.

Vendon slumped to the ground and clutched his face.

Hitting him with the truth so soon after his sister's death wasn't the safest thing to do.

It might be the best way to escape. Even saving the rest of Kees didn't matter to Ambrena anymore. She wanted to go back to Shells, with Tanna, Zella, and Dover. It might mean giving up her status as a skilled gen two adult for another season. Being an adult didn't matter anymore. The safety of her childhood did.

"Tell me where to dig that hasn't been dug out already," Rusty said.

"The only place I know of, is around the elephant lodge." Vendon reached for the bucket.

Rusty gripped her gatherboard. "Then that is where we will go. If you want to find what you are looking for."

Vendon glared at her. "It will weaken the lodge foundation."

Rusty's eyes closed. "Show me the walls. Perhaps, your elephants can move them, while we start at one corner on the outside. Xile can move the walls while we work."

It might work if he let them do it.

It was good to see Rusty taking heart again, and leading as she always had. All it took was one external catastrophe to override a more personal one.

Marken hid a grin behind his hand.

Vendon nodded. "We can try. You'll scare the animals with all the dust and commotion."

Brix and Jasey picked up their huntboards.

Ambrena followed close behind. While Rusty was choosing a new spot to dig, perhaps she could think over the tales. If she could talk with Rusty, or Brix, they might know something, or be able to awaken a memory she had forgotten. Even Jasey might know

something, though how he could convey his memories clearly, she wasn't sure.

Marken bumped her elbow from behind.

She glanced back.

A smile lit his face. He motioned her to hurry.

At the top of the pit, he turned to Vendon. "I need to show Rusty how we use the water scoops. Ambrena too. The scoops may help us dig later today and tomorrow. They can choose a better spot faster if they know how it works. Xile can look for the easiest part of the elephant lodge to move. With Brix and Jasey, they should be fine. We'll be back quickly."

Vendon snorted. "Take the three horses, if you are going to the water pond."

Marken grinned and raced ahead.

Rusty grabbed her arm, and they ran after him.

Larger than an average herd lodge, the enormous walls were expected to keep the elephants inside.

At the entry to the elephant lodge, they dissolved in giggles. The horses ran to them, along with the camel.

"Guess we can take all four?"

"Sure, why not?" Marken reached out to the camel.

The camel snorted.

Jasey took her head, and held it close to Marken. He lightly patted her rump to follow behind the horses.

Before long, they had reached they pond with the three horses and the camel. The animals stepped in for a drink.

"Okay, sit down." Marken searched around on the ground.

"I can't find what I need to show you. Blades of grass will have to do." He pulled some blades and connected them quickly together. Placed in the water, he tried to spin them around.

"These don't work well. However, with the right tools, the ones Kees builders make, do work. We have them at Kees, and need more. We lost many in the storm."

Rusty's eyes lit up. "You mean like this?"

She scrambled in her gatherboard, and pulled out the object Dan had given her. Holding it up in the bright sunlight, a light breeze touched its four wooden wings, and they circled.

Marken touched it gently. "Similar. Not exactly. Where did you find that?"

Rusty's eyes clouded. "Dan kept it. To give it to me or Henry when we became adults. He thinks it's from Mills."

"It'll be helpful, when we figure out what it is," Ambrena said.

"I think it's a toy," Rusty said. "We better hurry. Vendon will be waiting."

They walked slowly back to the elephant lodge, with the horses and camel trailing behind. Jasey waited at the entry. The horses passed through. A puzzled look crossed his face. He made a sign and motion with his left hand.

His camel nuzzled him. As his pet turned to go in the entry, Jasey slapped her rump hard. The camel startled, jumped backwards, turned around, and raced away, leaving a trail of dust behind her.

Jasey smiled. A tear trickled down his dust covered face. He held a finger to his lips.

Ambrena smiled. He had a plan.

Marken nodded and squeezed her hand.

She glanced over at him. He was probably in as much danger as they were, now that Yall was dead. His smile and nod to Jasey indicated he understood, and would follow their lead. How ever it ended for all of them.

Chapter 26

Firelight glistened as the Pit Miners ate around the Shims' fire pit. Children played and sang. Dogs snoozed; unless a child pulled their tail.

Corandra and Henry sat with Brael, Quan, Lavina, and Ida on the outside of the circle.

"I want to be a scout out front," Corandra said.

Henry covered his eyes.

Lavina took her hands. "How can you lead us, if you are ahead of us? We need you in the middle, to relay your messages to the group."

"If I'm with you, I'm not really leading. I'm following along. I have to find them. It's my fault."

"We've already covered this," Ida said. "The scouts will go ahead. You will stay with the rest of the rescue group. We will tie Ellie to the other horses if necessary. Or leave you here with Brael."

Corandra fumed. Why wouldn't they let her go by herself? She really didn't think there were two groups of roamers waiting to attack. There couldn't be. The hunters would have known. "Fine. I'll follow."

A dog leapt over her lap, and a laughing small child tumbled right into it. The boy struggled to sit up, tears racing down his cheeks. He looked so much like Zande, Corandra gasped.

The toddler teetered as Ida lifted him off her lap and wiped away his tears.

Too many people crowded into the villa center. Shims had never been intended for multi-villa gatherings, though the stilted lodges gave them a bit more room than other villas would have.

Corandra hurried to the fire to avoid as many as she could. She stirred the fire and ignored the crowd around her. If people came up to speak, she never heard them. Instead, she focused inward. Or, maybe outward, onto the fire. Goddess Kafa, or even Goddess Amber should have taken her irritable life, instead of the wanted Zande, and maybe even Ola by now. Sighing, she took a step forward.

A hand grabbed her elbow.

"Don't you dare step into the fire," Henry said. "We need your help. We can't leave you here, covered in burns, a burden to those few of Shims who stay."

Tears poured out of her eyes. "I wanted to give myself, and bring them back. Like Ambrena's mother."

Henry pulled her close. "You can't bring Zande back. Stop punishing yourself."

His words whispered in her hair, sent a tingle down her back.

He pulled away, and held her at arm's length. "Ambrena's mother was hurt, as were many others, and did not feel they could go on living without hurting others. Is that how you feel?"

She nodded and tried not to blubber.

He closed his eyes, and then opened them, to look deep into hers. "Promise me you won't do anything to hurt yourself. Or disappear, until we find Rusty and Ambrena."

"I should go alone."

"Corandra, you are stubborn. We don't know who took them, or why. If they could have come back to Shims, they would have by now. They have Brix and Jasey, after all. You are closest to Rusty and Ambrena. You know more of the secrets they know, than any of us. Symbols, a turned leaf, anything a fellow hunter or scout may overlook, you will recognize the significance of, because they are your best friends."

Not really. Not anymore, anyway. Rusty would probably refuse to look at her. "I need to be out front," Corandra said.

"If you promise you won't run off, you and I can stay ahead of Lavina, Wenda, and Ida, okay? We have to stay where the scouts can find us easily. And you can still see clues that haven't been trampled."

"Why don't you despise me like everyone else?" She tried to look into his eyes, though the flickering firelight didn't make that easy.

He let go and looked at the fire. "No one despises you. Your behavior, perhaps. No matter what anyone says, I'll never dislike you."

"Have you heard what they say?"

He nodded. "And I know a few of the tales Zella used to tell. If we are anything like people in our past, it will take both of us to set right the wrongs of the generation before us."

"You mean my sponsor."

"And mine."

"Your sponsor died too."

The firelight crackled and lit Henry's face. "How do we know for what reason he came to Old Shells? How do we know why he left Mills? I intend to find out someday. And, I need you to go with me. Whatever he brought, or intended to bring, is what brought the downfall of both of our sponsors."

"He was a good sponsor. Rusty said so."

"He may well have been. That doesn't mean he was a good man. I intend to find out." Henry kicked a stick into the burning coals.

"Go to sleep, if you both want to be ready to go in the morning," Brael said. "Come along to my lodge."

Corandra lagged behind. Henry might be right. Only partially. A good sponsor is a good man. What had he brought, and why? Ever with a one-track mind, she'd agreed to find Rusty and Ambrena and bring them back. Then, she would find the real answers to their past.

Before morning even dawned, the search party assembled on the edge of the clearing.

"I'll lead until we reach the place I found the blood," Wenda said. "Scouts have been out since yesterday searching for more signs nearby."

Wenda led off on her camel, with Corandra and Henry close behind. Without enough horses and camels for everyone, the pace would be slow. The healthiest people would travel. Some who trained the day before would stay in Shims to help guard the children and those less able to travel. Children had gathered several piles of stones, to be used as weapons if needed.

By daybreak, they reached the place Wenda had indicated.

"Look Corandra, what do you see?"

The grass had been trampled in confusion. A footprint looked like Ambrena's, next to the dried blood. Another, nearby resembled Rusty's.

"They were walking. And I think they rested here. It's been several days; we better go on." She urged Ellie forward, following the track.

Henry rode behind, and off to the side of her track.

At least the elephant path was well trampled, and easy to follow. Corandra tried to remember what she could of Jasey and Brix. They would have tried to leave some sign behind if they were safe. There had been no sign of burial, or burning, at the bloody spot. So whoever was hurt must have lived, at that point, anyway.

Ellie paused to nibble on some grass. She picked something up and turned her head around.

Corandra took a braided grass and flower circlet from her lips. "I think Jasey made it."

Henry took it. "Could be, it's promising at least."

Ellie sprinted east, until they reached a wide track going north and south.

Now was Corandra's chance to prove her tracking abilities. Northward, there was no sign of anything living. Southward, a hazy sky obscured the fresh trail. Not even small creatures ran across the open track. The north to south track had been made more recently than the track they were on.

And to think, her sponsor, and his death, as the stories told it had brought her to this lonely, desolate place. The death of Blake, the Webbel leader, had been two fold, fiery ant bites while tied up next to a log, and then fed to the Goddess Kafa, because he could not be saved, even if he had deserved to live. That lakeside memory had imprinted on her brain, even though she had never seen it. The fireside tales would dance before her closed her eyes forever.

"What do you think?" Henry said.

"We haven't heard anything from the scouts. I'm going ahead to check across the path."

"We are near a river. We never hunt beyond it," Wenda said.

"Do dangerous people live on the other side?" Corandra turned to the hunter.

"People we don't know travel it. We aren't sure where they belong. They've never spoken to any hunter that I know of."

"Stay here, until I make it across the path," Corandra said. "We'll check this river, and find out what it is hiding."

Wenda handed her an extra spear.

Corandra urged Ellie on, beyond the lifeless pathway. She didn't stop to see if the crowd behind her followed. Her senses focused on the sounds of running water far ahead. The babble of the Pit Miners diminished behind her.

A sudden rush of wind startled her.

Ellie screeched and escaped along the path.

Henry screamed.

Corandra managed to hold on.

A darkened tree-like blur dashed in front of Ellie.

Ellie snorted, and tried to run to the right.

Corandra turned to face the shadow as it focused into a dark male shape.

Henry's horse snorted, as a dark skinned person grabbed his harness and held it still.

The man pointed a spear at Henry's face. "Food!"

"Have none." Henry sat tall and calmly.

The man raised his spear. "Hungry."

Wenda rode up, alone. No one else in sight. "We have a little food. When did you last eat?"

The man grunted. "Too long."

Corandra glanced around the Grass Sea, as tall she when standing. Dark spots everywhere, probably people from an unknown group, all around the three of them. Hopefully, the rest of the Pit Miners had safely backed away.

Wenda's horse shifted nervously, as ten people with spears surrounded her and Henry, and ignored Corandra.

"Kees took what food we managed to grow this dry season." The man said.

Wenda shifted to control her horse. "We would help you if we could. We are searching for a lost group of people."

Henry lifted his right hand in a fist and moved it toward the man with the spear.

The speaker for the group waved his spear.

Another jumped on the horse behind Henry and raced away with him.

The dark people faded back into the grasses.

Corandra jerked Ellie to go after Henry and his horse.

A spear was thrown at them.

Ellie stopped.

"Let them go."

"Henry."

Wenda took her hand and whispered. "They want the horse for food. He will escape, or Ida will find him. Wait here until these people leave."

Corandra sat on Ellie and waited. She had to choose to rescue Henry, or try to find Rusty and Ambrena. Regardless of what Wenda said. Who was in the most danger would be most important. The rest of them could go find Rusty and Ambrena following this easy trail. Henry was alone.

Zella and Dover expected her to take care of him.

Ellie started toward the trail Henry's horse had made.

A low bleating sound stopped her in her tracks.

Running directly down the trail towards them was a young camel, maybe a season older than Ellie.

"Jasey's camel," Wenda said.

Now the choice was clear.

Rusty, Ambrena, Brix, and Jasey would never turn a villa's animal loose if they were alive.

As much as she argued with Henry, she couldn't bear the thought of him not being there to argue with. Others would turn away and ignore her, while he would spar equally.

She turned her head both directions, trying to decide.

Corandra could follow Henry's horse, or allow Ida to find him.

Or, race down the camel's path to find the remains of her friends, with Wenda and the rest of the Pit Miners.

Chapter 27

Rusty grinned at the interplay between Marken and Ambrena. Two who should be enemies fast becoming friends. Corandra should see this in action. Marken wasn't all bad. Vendon and Xile she wouldn't trust in any known villa. Dangerous, more like Blake and Orid. Their voices sent a shiver up her spine.

"Hey, how about over here," Vendon yelled. "The ground is softer, and we might be able to pull out the elephant lodge stones."

Rusty grabbed Jasey's hand and ran to see where he pointed. Without looking up at Vendon's leering hairy face, she studied the ground inside the lodge. She nudged a lump or two of elephant dung with her toe. The dung would have loosened the ground, and with former rains might actually help artifacts float to the top, to be trampled by elephants the next season.

"Let me dig here, a finger width or so and see," she said.

Vendon growled. "Hurry."

Rusty reached into her gatherboard for her digging tools. The wooden artifact almost fell out. If Vendon saw it, he didn't say anything.

She pulled the gatherboard in front of her and scooped off a layer of dirt and dung. There would be plenty of dung here, several generation's worth. Excellent gardening soil; and a heating source for the winter.

If she could take some back to Shells.

She gulped. If the four of them ever managed to escape. With Marken's help, they might be able to escape at night. Then, however, Vendon and Xile would be free to follow them, whenever they wished, and would be a danger to their villas. Especially, if they returned with more people from Kees. A repeat in a worse way of the violence of her childhood, more like the violence before the great grandmothers of today remembered. Violence between villas who did not know each other.

Her whole body trembled as she pulled away the loose ground. She couldn't let that happen.

Jasey knew what he was doing, she hoped.

She glanced up at him and tried to smile.

He pointed at the dirt.

There, in the ground was a glittery object.

"Here will be fine."

Vendon grunted and waved to Xile. Together, they herded five of the elephants, and the three horses to the other end of the elephant lodge.

Rusty continued to dig with Ambrena by her by side.

"Look, a piece of glass someone dropped."

Ambrena nodded, concentrating on removing the soil nearby.

Brix, Jasey, and Marken had chosen places a little further away.

"You okay?" Rusty said.

Ambrena's hair framed her face as she looked up at Rusty. "I think so. I feel not quite right is all. I am thinking back through all my training, trying to figure out what is wrong with me. I don't think Yall had a catching sickness."

Rusty covered her mouth and laughed. She sat back on her heels. "Marken, can you bring us some water to drink, please?"

Ambrena glanced at her and at Marken. Her hands reached toward him. "I'd rather he didn't leave us alone with Vendon and Xile working over there."

"He only has to go to the entry. He'll be right back." Rusty watched her intently.

Brix pretended to dig, while watching as well.

Ambrena's eyes followed every step Marken took.

"I wouldn't worry. I think I know what you're feeling. It'll pass." Rusty smiled.

Ambrena's fingers shook as she took the water gourd. Her face turned red.

Marken turned away.

Intense situations could lead to many unexpected feelings. Zella said it could happen. Like Dan and Nala at their age.

Vendon and Xile had ropes around two of the stones, and the elephants hooked up. Elephants pulled at the harness; ready to tug at Xile's command.

"You five better go back to your brushy explorations while we pull these down. Wouldn't want you to be hurt." Vendon laughed.

Rusty didn't need to be told twice. She drew a quick circle in the dirt, grabbed her tools, and her gatherboard. "We'll be back when the ground stops shaking."

"You better hope we can move these without breaking them. We will have to move several, so you may have most of the day. Stay nearby."

Rusty glanced back as they reached the entry.

Xile urged the elephants to pull on the stones.

Vendon watched them leave with an almost wistful look on his face.

Near the campfire, Brix stopped. "Do you need us?"

Rusty looked from Ambrena to Marken and back at Brix.

Brix pointed his spear away from the brush. "Supplies are low. We can snare a rabbit, and bring water. Maybe catch something larger near the thicket between your mini-lodge and the pond. We won't be any further away than you, and they'll understand, or go hungry."

"We should be safe," Rusty said. "Our smell is all over the place now."

Jasey patted her arm.

At least her smell was.

Brix picked up a rock and turned to the pond. "We'll join you, if possible. They know we can't leave without the horses." He led Jasey, pointing out places and objects Rusty could barely glimpse.

"Let's go," Marken said. "I can hardly wait to see what we find."

Ambrena giggled and ran ahead.

Marken chased after her.

Rusty shook her head. How could Ambrena be interested in him? Of course, he was the nicer of the roamers. He wasn't really one of them, or so he said. He seemed trustworthy; they'd know soon enough.

She lagged behind.

"I'll have to leave when you do," Marken said. "Vendon never did like me, and now, they won't tolerate me. If I'm lucky, they'll send me on a raiding mission to Tree Burb and the people there will kill me."

"They raid people?" Ambrena said.

He nodded. "Kees stole food from them last season, and again this season. We had outgrown our food supply, and Tree Burb, a small group, were nearby. I didn't want to be part of it. Luckily, I

came here last season. This season, they'd recognize and kill me. I did it so Yall wouldn't starve."

"That's awful! What are the Tree Burb people like?" Ambrena said.

Rusty passed them and walked into the mini-lodge.

"They are skinny, and have darker skin than ours. Like the legends. That's why they are called Tree Burb. They never did Kees any harm; that I know of. Certainly, they never harmed my burb."

The tall box on the table flickered. More than it had earlier in the day. Rusty reached to it, and jumped back when she felt a warm glow encircle her hand.

"It's good you tried to stay away from them." Ambrena stood in the entry.

He laughed. "I've seen them on the river. They have their own style of boats, and their own river. They use words I've never heard before in my travels, though we could talk about common items, or ideas clearly enough. Why Vendon and Xile decided to attack them instead of ask for help, I'll never know."

Marken and Ambrena were supposed to be clearing the brush around the mini-lodge.

Rusty decided to ignore the rest of the conversation. After all, she had work to do. She wiped the smaller box Ambrena had started cleaning earlier. More letters and other marks appeared.

"Anything?" Ambrena walked up beside her.

Rusty nodded. "Looks like something. We should know what it is."

"Or I should, since I studied the lore more than you."

"I lived with Zella longer than you."

"Tanna knows as much she does!"

"Do you two always argue like this?" Marken laughed.

Rusty closed her eyes. "No, never. We usually only argue with Corandra. I miss her."

Ambrena's hand covered hers. "So do I. I think if Corandra weren't that way, someone else, or many, would be. Let's look at these better. Can we pull them outside in the sunlight?"

Rusty picked up the small rectangular lettered piece. It pulled partially away, with a long rope stretched out behind it. "It seems to be attached by this."

Ambrena reached for the box in her hand. She twisted it this way and that, trying to focus as much light on it as she could. "It is unusual. Let's look at the little egg shape beside it."

Rusty placed the long, thin rectangle on the table and reached for the smaller hand-sized egg shape. It too was covered with the dust and dirt of ages past. Who knew how long it had sat here; and what damage the weather may have done.

Behind those two pieces, a dusty grey square was snug against the entry wall. She wiped the dust off. Nothing special about it, and no way to open it to store anything in it. How could the ancients have used it? It must've served a purpose, once.

Somehow, it had survived many gens without animals tearing it up. How could that have happened? Her fingers ran down the sides of the box. In two places, something stuck out of the box. She gently touched them.

One of the pieces fell out.

Ambrena gasped. "It looks almost like Goddess Amber's ancient artifact."

"If we had it with us, we could find out." Rusty picked up the piece and turned it around in her hand.

"I have it," Ambrena said. "It's in my gatherboard. I'll go out into the sunlight to find it."

Marken followed behind her.

Looking at it wouldn't tell them what it had been used for. It could mean anything. The piece that she held in her hand was about the same length as her finger, a little thinner, with a piece of metal at the end. The metal end had stuck into the box.

Ambrena laughed.

Rusty looked up.

"I found it. Now, let's see what it does."

Chapter 28

Ambrena raced into the mini-lodge with the artifact in hand. She took the one the Rusty had, and held them up side by side in the sunlight. "Not quite the same. I wonder if it'll fit."

"Wait, don't try anything," Marken said. "Wouldn't want to break the artifact if it doesn't."

He took the two pieces and held them together. "In fact, I'm not sure we should do anything until Brix and Jasey return."

"I'll go find them." Rusty turned to go out the entry.

He touched her hand. "What they are doing is important. I think they're keeping an eye on Vendon and Xile as well. Wait till they come. Let's go over the lore. It may help."

"We know our lore. What lore does your villa share?" Ambrena led the way outside, to sit and wait in the sunshine.

Marken sat beside her. "We call our villa a burb. Though, I'm not from Kees. I'm from one of the smaller burbs down the river. We trade with Kees. When we have anything to spare. That's how I met Yall."

His hands reached up to wipe away a tear. "I hoped by joining them, they wouldn't attack my burb like they do the Tree Burb."

"So they aren't nice, normally?" Rusty asked.

Marken drew a deep breath. "It's hard to say. It seems every few seasons they attack someone along the river. My birth burb raises elephants for Kees, so they won't attack us. Usually. I think they're used to being in charge and telling others what to do. Somehow, I don't think your villas would have been safe much longer either."

"Shelpit is almost empty too. We have to find another mine for the Pit Miners to go to. Everywhere we know of is empty, and our ancestors have sorted them for gens." Rusty picked up a few leaves to twirl.

Ambrena listened to them talk, and tried to think. There was something she had forgotten. Everyone had forgotten. The Goddess Amber had taken many things from them, saying they didn't need them anymore. What had they done with what the Goddess had given them? They had continued to search for the memories of their ancestors. Perhaps they were supposed to make new memories. There had to be another way to relearn the good

forgotten knowledge. Without the fear, anger, and hurt of the past being part of it. She'd find it, if it could be found.

Would anyone believe her if she said this out loud? Rusty might. She'd fight it. It would mean the end of their way of life, and so many would no longer have a useful skill in the villa, as they knew it. They'd have to find a new meaning, or be one of the builders creating the objects they needed to survive.

The ground shook. More lodge stones must have been pulled down. If they broke, the elephants and horses might leave.

Ambrena ignored the conversation between Rusty and Marken. She stood up and walked to the bushes. Many useful plants grew here. Dandelions and rose bushes grew in one bower, with a tangle of iris leaves and a fern in another. This must have been a well taken care of place, once. The Goddesses, Amber, and Kafa, were trying to give her a message, if she could decipher it.

The brush rattled beside her. Jasey stepped into the clearing.

Her hand went to her chest before she realized it was him.

Blinking fast, she said, "Does Brix have snares set?"

He nodded.

"Will he come here?"

Jasey shook his head.

Ambrena held out her hand. "Come then. Let's go see what I found."

Marken and Rusty were still speaking quietly by the entry. They looked up at her and Jasey.

"I think we need to go ahead and check it," Ambrena said.

She walked through the entry and stood in front of the boxes.

Jasey, Marken, and Rusty stood behind her.

Ambrena took a deep breath, and pulled the square plastic piece to her. "It came out of here, right?"

Rusty nodded.

She took the ancestral object in her hand. Tanna or Zella should be the one trying the artifact. Not her. No one knew where her mother had come from. Her mother and sponsor were forgotten. Ambrena could be anyone, from anywhere. Perhaps, even a rattler, like Corandra. Her hands shook.

Zella had sent the artifact with her as a hopeful good luck charm. Tanna's eyes had filled with tears as she handed it to her.

Ambrena had thought maybe they were tears of relief that she was leaving. Maybe they had been tears of hope. Her hands loosened their hold. The two metal ends were nearly identical. Tanna's was a little longer, and shinier.

Another deep breath, and she pushed the ancestral object into the hole in the square piece.

Something buzzed and clicked.

Ambrena stepped back and covered her mouth with her hand.

The artifact did not fall out of the larger square.

Buzzing continued.

The tall box flickered. A picture of the mini-lodge appeared.

"Welcome friends and family."

Ambrena searched for the source of the sound. It seemed to come from the square piece. How could that be? Almost like the talking plastic rectangle Blake found, and accused Tanna of stealing.

The picture on the tall square changed to a flower covered field.

"I have no idea what you still know, and don't know. On this disk is a medical reference library, as much as I was able to save."

The voice stopped, and several thumbnail sized pictures appeared on the square.

Ambrena pointed at them. "What are they?"

Rusty stepped up beside her. "Too small to make out. And how do we find the knowledge, if we can't hear it?"

Ambrena turned to Marken. "If I take it out, and put it back in the small square, will it speak again?"

His eyes were large as he glanced from square to square. "No idea. I've never heard of a talking box before. Or one where pictures appear and disappear on the surface."

Jasey grabbed her hand.

Sticks crunched outside the lodge.

Ambrena's heart raced. She grabbed the ancestral object and pulled it out of the small box, holding it tight in her hand.

"Rusty, Ambrena, you okay?" Brix said.

She breathed a sigh of relief. "We're okay."

"I thought I heard a strange voice." He stepped into the entry.

Ambrena nodded. "The Lava ancestral tool made the square talk. Then it stopped."

Brix's eyes closed, then reopened. "Better not let it speak anymore until Vendon and Xile are gone. We'll come back later, in winter if we have to."

"Good idea." Marken stepped away from the table.

"It said it had medical knowledge. And then it stopped speaking," Rusty said. "Maybe Brael or Dover has to be here for it to speak to?"

"We will ask them soon. Come on. Let's go now, before they come looking for us." Brix led them back out to where Yall had waited their first day in this strange place.

"Marken you will come with us. And do not speak of any of this to Vendon and Xile, understand?"

"There is nothing to share with them." Marken looked Brix in the eye.

Brix moved a pile of leaves and pulled out a pair of rabbits. He turned to walk to the fire pit. "Rusty, you cook tonight."

When they arrived back at camp, Vendon and Xile sat by the fire. "About to look for you. You can dig now; the stones are moved." Vendon looked from one to the other. "You haven't taken any fire with you, have you?"

Brix and Jasey shook their heads.

"We wouldn't," Rusty said. "It would burn us up as well."

Vendon laughed. "We'd protect our dig area."

Ambrena gulped. His words brought back a memory of a fire. A massive fire, where screams echoed throughout the darkness. She fought back a whimper.

Rusty grabbed her hand. "We will take a few of these charred logs to drag and loosen the top layer so we can dig in the morning."

Brix handed Ambrena one to carry, and she followed behind him to the now smaller elephant lodge.

As they scraped the ground, the elephants stayed on the other side. Their horses, stayed near them, almost like dogs would.

Perhaps they'd give Kara, and her pups, to Corandra if she didn't make it back. Something stable to be responsible for might help her.

Brix glanced in the direction of Shims occasionally, as if he waited on something, or someone, to arrive.

Ambrena worked, dragging away the top layer of soil and dung. The odor of elephant dung disturbed her stomach. Under a few layers, white flakes were stirred up into the air, to float down and stick in their hair, and on their bodies.

Vendon and Xile joined them, using the elephants to drag larger logs. Before long, everyone coughed from all the white powder in the air.

Marken took her wood from her. "Go for water."

She wiped the hair out of her eyes. Even though winter fast approached, sweat rolled down her back and thighs. Walking back with the water, it sloshed and dampened the ground in places.

Marken took a sip and handed the gourd to Brix. He bent down and whispered to her. "You, Rusty, and Jasey stay between me and Brix tonight. I don't trust Vendon and Xile."

She took the water from Brix, and shared it, and Marken's fears, with Rusty and Jasey.

They didn't react in any visible way.

Ambrena would rather focus on the message the box had given them. She didn't intend to sleep at all.

At dark, Vendon and Xile called a halt to the day's work. The elephant lodge was as snug as they could make it.

Around the fire, Vendon and Xile laughed and jeered, drinking from something they didn't offer to share with anyone else.

Looks passed between the five, as they stayed close together.

The fire burned low, and still no one wanted to sleep until Vendon and Xile were asleep.

Ambrena's heart raced. Her mind fluttered as she tried to think over the lore, and what the voice from the square had said. Her thoughts were interrupted so often; she gave up and reached for a few stems of grass to weave. The pattern of Yall's tunic would be easy with a few stems of varying colors.

Finally, her head sagged against Rusty's shoulder.

Marken covered her with a blanket. He sat and watched the fire.

She glanced at his form, tall and straight in the dancing shadows.

At sunrise, she woke up, stiff from the unusual position.

Brix was nearby, stirring up the fire.

She sat up, and managed to disturb Rusty, and Jasey, on the other side.

It would be a long day of digging, something only Rusty was accustomed to doing. She sighed and took the tea Brix handed her.

"Let's go and work, before Vendon and Xile wake up. They may sleep late today." Marken whispered.

They picked up their gatherboards and walked off to the elephant lodge.

"They sent me for water after you fell asleep. They'll sleep most of the day. I made sure of that." Marken opened the entry.

"Should we really work then? There is so much to do," Ambrena said.

"We have no idea when help will arrive," Brix said. "One more day is all I dare give. I don't want another night like last night. If they wake up before Brael arrives, we aren't able to fight."

"The plant will make them weaker, though it won't counteract what they chose to drink last night. Stay close, and don't take off alone." Marken shut the entry behind them.

Ambrena chose a place to dig. If she could be alone to think it would help. The place where she spoke to Goddess Amber came into her mind.

Her horse came over and stood nearby, blocking the sight of the others.

Marken came behind it, and stayed where he could see her.

The thought of what he was protecting her from chilled her to the bone. She knew he and Brix were right. The five of them couldn't easily fight off Vendon and Xile.

They couldn't run.

If they did, they'd never sleep in safety again.

And, the Pit Miners would be in more danger from Kees, than from the disease Corandra and Zande had awakened.

Chapter 29

Ellie shifted nervously under Corandra.

Rescue Henry, or rescue Rusty and Ambrena, if they were still alive. That was the choice.

Wenda had made her choice. She galloped around Corandra, and on down the trail to the river. The Pit Miners appeared through the tall Grass Sea, and followed behind her.

Ida arrived beside Corandra on Shan, a camel known for speed. She nodded and they chased after the strange tree people.

Tree people in tales could be mean, and swift to justice for any perceived wrong. Even more so than the Pit Miners. They could also be fun, friendly, and full of laughter and song. Almond was said to have many tree people among their distant ancestors.

They weren't known to live in the area, although a few hunters from Webbel and Shims had mentioned they might have seen one. Other people laughed, and said the summer heat had them confuse old stumps with living people.

If the tree people were on foot, they should quickly catch them.

Henry's horse prints merged with several others, at a pace that didn't slow down. No sign of camel or other horse footprints. Perhaps, they were afraid of camels, and that was why they hadn't bothered her, or Wenda.

Swiftly they followed the trail as it wove between rocks of a strange shape and color. They were a little longer than her hand, red, and in many broken pieces. Some stacked high, while others littered the ground. More trails joined the main trail. At each juncture, Ida slowed down to verify the direction the hoof prints continued. They didn't want to keep going south, if Henry had been forced another direction.

Dust clouds billowed in the direction the path followed. Thunder rumbled. As it grew louder, Corandra glanced at Ida. They would have to make a decision, and soon, if the path didn't diverge.

A herd of wild cattle emerged above the grass. They raced ahead of the cloud of dust, directly toward them.

Ida pulled on Ellie's harness. Off the path, and away from the stampede.

The herd thundered by, with no sign of what had spooked it. Lions and tigers were the most common cause of herd stampedes. Occasionally, other large cats, whose names had been long forgotten by even the Lava villa members, stalked the herds.

Corandra waited on the dust to settle. They wouldn't find the trail until they could see. Crouching and choking, she urged Ellie forward.

Ida rode beside her as they walked down the stampede trail. All sign of horse prints had been overrun by the stampeding cows. No signs of the trail branched off in either direction. Grass waved in a slight breeze, not giving the secret of where Henry had been taken. Silence, other than their camel's footsteps. No small animals had returned from escaping the stampede. A few torn, bloody, and unrecognizable carcasses showed the damage scrambling hoofs could do to what may have been wolf pups caught in the rush.

Corandra turned away. Wolves were valued among the Pit Miners as the ancestors of dogs. They often joined the dogs when hunting the large herds, and received their fair share. Living on the outside, looking in, and wanting to belong, like her.

"No sign of the trail we were following," Ida said.

"We have to find them. If they took Henry, they might attack again, in larger numbers. We have to know how many they are, and where they are." Corandra searched the sides of the path, looking for signs of Henry and his horse. Her eyes returned to the bloody carcass in the middle of the stampeded trail. Fur was obvious. It wasn't Henry.

Ida stopped. "Corandra, no one from Shims has ever been this far. We have to go back."

"We can't! We have to know! What kind of a scout are you, anyway?" Ellie moved under her, pulling back toward the only place she knew.

Ida closed her eyes. "Good enough to know when I am in over my head. We can't go on alone. If we are captured, no one will ever find Henry or know the danger we are in. Wenda's group will have to help us find them."

Corandra glanced down the path. Finding where the horse had branched off would not be easy, either now, or later, if they hadn't

already missed it. More people would be safer. "We'll never catch up."

Ida laughed. "We could if we were going to try. Let's go inform Quan. If he says to go on, and lead a small group that are left in Shims, we will. It's a plan at least. If Wenda's group isn't back by nightfall, Ellie and Shan can catch them. She'll stop. Walking people won't be able to follow the trail in the dark. They aren't trackers."

Corandra sighed and glanced down the trail again. No one, not even Webbel knew what kind of people, animals, or lands lay to the far south. Dangerous roamers came from that direction. Maybe Dan would know; if he were with Quan.

She turned Ellie and followed the cattle trail back toward Shims. Leaving Henry to fend for himself wasn't what Dover or Zella would want. Of course, they would rather the rest of the villas had a chance to protect themselves and survive, even if Henry did not come back.

Her eyes misted. She slid as Ellie shifted against Ida, and Shan.

Corandra glanced to the side Ellie had shied from.

A large lion padded along beside them. His shaggy mane framed a panting mouth. Plodding feet kept pace with the camels, neither going ahead, nor struggling behind.

Corandra gripped her spear. A male lion could be chasing after lionesses who had stampeded the wild cows. They'd have to be careful.

The lion glanced up at her, slobber dripping from his jaws. He glanced back in front and kept pace until they reached the section where they had met the wild cows. He loped off east, a different direction than Wenda had gone.

Corandra drew in a deep breath.

Ida touched her shoulder. "Come on, let's follow this path to Shims, it's quicker." She led them down a narrow path through the Grass Sea.

No sign of the lion following them. Corandra had never felt so alone in the open. Even though the Grass Sea was almost as tall as she was, she felt as if every living thing could see her, and she could see nothing.

Ellie sensed her mood, and stayed behind Ida. Normally, they would slow to a walk, to enjoy the plant and animal life, and the quiet. Instead, they ran as fast as the two camels could go long term with their loads.

Dark approached as they reached Shims.

Children gathered around the fire with the adults who had remained.

Ida walked her camel through the crowd, straight to where Quan sat on log.

Quan looked up at them. His eyes darkened as he saw no one behind them. He looked down at the ground.

Ida slid off her camel. "Any word?"

He shook his head.

Corandra slid off Ellie and waited.

Quan looked up at her. "Tell me."

Corandra told him of the attack, the tree people taking Henry, the stampeding wild cows, and even the lion that strode beside them.

He looked up at them. "It is as we feared."

Ida squatted in front of him and took his hands. "We must ride tonight and find Wenda, and the others. Only with a group do we have any hope."

"Gather the scout trainees." He turned to the fire.

Ida went in search of the scouts.

Corandra slid to the ground beside Quan.

"Quan, did we do right? I wanted to follow and find Henry. Zella and Dover will never forgive me. Nor Rusty."

He closed his eyes before looking into the fire. "One can never guess the outcome that one does not try. Better for all of us to know."

Ida and Corandra explained to the young scouts, barely as old as she was, what they had seen, and heard, and the trail they had followed.

"Do you want us to find the trail in daylight?" One of the young women asked.

Ida glanced at her.

The whole group turned to Corandra. Quan may have been right. They couldn't follow a trail they hadn't seen in the dark any

more than Wenda's group could. "I think you can wait until daylight. Stay together. Watch for trouble. There are so few adults here now, we need everyone to help." She hoped it was the right thing to say.

"Don't run off like I do. It won't help you, or the rest of the Pit Miners. We have to go now." Corandra hurried to Ellie. It would be a long night, and she and Ida had never been where they were going. Neither had their camels.

Ellie's stride rocked Corandra to sleep. Falling off and landing under her hooves wouldn't do anyone any good. Struggling to stay awake, she watched for signs she might have missed. They picked their way through the moonlight until they reached the river. The camels drank thirstily.

"I wish we dared rest," Ida said.

"It would be nice. Will Wenda have moved on before we reach her?"

"I don't know. The trail will be more difficult to follow now. Better go down a bit, and cross the river."

"I thought you said you'd never been across?"

"As hunters and scouts, we have to know where it is safe to cross, especially if a large animal we are hunting crosses the river."

Chapter 30

Rusty tried to focus on digging as the horses crowded closer.

If all Kees looked for were glass particles, she wasn't interested, and all the good artifacts were probably long gone. Ropes dangled on the nearby elephant lodge stones that had been moved yesterday.

"Marken, come here." Rusty sat back on her heels. The stones gleamed and glistened in the early morning dew.

Marken slid over beside her. "Can we use the ropes to tie up Vendon and Xile?"

He glanced at the ropes, back her, and smiled. "Good idea. What will we do with them then?"

Ambrena's face paled.

Brix watched them closely.

"I don't think we dare leave them here. They might escape. And I don't think we should kill them, we may need their help to know where Kees is."

"You have me." Marken walked over to the ropes and pulled a few away. "I think these are strong enough. They'll wake up soon. What's your plan?"

Rusty pushed her tools back in her gatherboard. "We set out to find Uden, Fendon, and Jorn. They may be able to help us."

Ambrena touched her arm. "I don't want to leave the mini-lodge and the artifacts. They may be our answer."

"And Jasey's camel should bring the Pit Miners here," Brix said.

"We don't know that he went back to Shims, or any of the villas. This job is ours, and we have to do it." Rusty picked up her gatherboard.

"Ambrena, I think it may be our answer. We need help to find the answers hidden in the squares, if you can understand that. Plus," her fingers touched her chest. "I need answers too, and so do you. And if Corandra's mother can be found, she needs her, as much as we do." Rusty walked to the entry without looking back.

Marken ran up behind her. "Are we taking them, or abandoning them?"

Rusty's eyes closed. She opened them and looked up at Marken. "We may need them. Tie them up and attach them to the elephants."

"We are taking the elephants?"

She nodded. "We are taking the elephants, and turning the horses loose. Elephants can travel fast, and find water."

"You've never ridden one."

"I'll learn. And so will Brix, Jasey, and Ambrena. The horses will be set loose to return to Shells with a message." She grabbed a piece of rope and stalked off to the fire pit.

Xile and Vendon snored beside the glowing embers.

Rusty glanced at Marken. She pointed first to Xile, and then from Marken to Vendon.

Brix joined Marken and they stood over Vendon with the rope.

Jasey walked up beside Rusty.

She handed him a piece of rope and pointed at Xile's feet. Jasey bent over, almost touching his feet.

Rusty breathed deep. She drew the rope around Xile's right wrist. Tying a slipknot, she pulled it gently.

He groaned and rolled over.

She stepped over him, close to the fire.

Sliding her rope under his left wrist, she pulled it against the first slipknot.

His eyes opened.

The knots jerked tight.

Xile tried to scramble to his feet. He fell screaming on top of her.

Rusty's eyes closed as she kicked and fought to push him off. Her hands let loose of the rope.

Faster than she could realize what happened, he rolled over against the warm embers, and screamed again.

She found the rope and pulled it tight.

With Jasey and Ambrena's help, they pulled his body away from the fire.

He lay their writing in pain, no skin aflame. Scorched marks on his arms would sting. His hair had burnt, leaving an odor that she wouldn't soon forget.

Brix and Marken tied up Vendon without a fight.

"What are you going to do now?" Vendon said. "You don't stand a chance without us. All of Kees will die."

"No," Marken said. "Not everyone in Kees is bad. Perhaps our God and Goddess are angry with your behavior, and that is why they sent the giant wave to take your mother away from you."

Vendon laughed. "Then why did she take Yall from you?"

Marken's rage lifted his arm as if to strike Vendon. "She hid under your rule. Yall was your sister, and not strong enough to stand and say no to you."

He grabbed the rope on Vendon's feet. "Come on, we'll take him first."

Brix and Marken half dragged, and half carried, Vendon to the first elephant waiting at the lodge entry.

Rusty sat with hands on her knees, and took a deep breath.

Ambrena checked Xile's arms and legs. "Some burns. He'll live. Somehow I don't think Goddess Amber or Kafa would want us to worry about them."

"The smell of burnt flesh." Rusty poked a stick at the fire pit.

"It almost scared me away too. You okay?" Ambrena sat beside her.

"As soon as we are gone, we'll feel normal again." Rusty glanced at Xile. Better not speak of it where he could hear.

Ambrena nodded.

Jasey stood over Xile with a stick in his hand.

Marken and Brix returned leading an elephant. It didn't take them long to load Xile the side opposite Vendon.

"Better make a grass mat to cover their faces," Marken said. "I'll be right back."

Rusty and Ambrena wove two quick mats while Marken lined up the elephants, and attached them together.

"I have to leave something so if Corandra comes, she will know we are okay," Rusty said.

"She'll come. What do you want to leave?" Ambrena tied the cover over Xile's face, and made sure he couldn't scream or yell through it.

Rusty glanced around the fire pit. Corandra couldn't read, and words might be washed away if it rained.

Marken held the horses beside him. "How about the gift you gave me?" he asked Ambrena.

She turned red.

He smiled and leaned closer. "I know what it means in your villa. And I know what you meant by giving it."

Ambrena turned away.

"Corandra would recognize it, if she finds the right horse. She might take it wrong though. She might think Ambrena was hurt and died."

Marken nodded. "It was a thought. I have an idea. You hold the horses Ambrena. Come with me Rusty."

On the other side of the fire pit he whispered, "She would know what the ancestral object looks like?"

Rusty nodded.

He grabbed a few short logs and stones and placed them carefully, to look similar to it, enlarged. "Will it do?"

"I hope so. Which way do we go?"

"You are leading this expedition, don't forget."

"Release the horses!"

They galloped off down the trail she hoped led back to Shims.

There was no other way now, than the elephants. She gulped. Elephants were tall and she had never ridden one before.

"Help us settle on the elephants."

Marken grinned. "Of course."

Before long, they were on the elephant's backs and ready to go. Marken rode next to Rusty, to help direct the group.

"Which way?"

Rusty peered out over the grass tops from her perch on the elephant's back. "Northeast. Dan thinks they stay near some mountains in that region. I've never seen a mountain, have you?"

Marken started the herd moving. "Only water mountains, and those will devour you."

Ambrena rode her elephant up beside Marken. "Tell us about them."

Marken launched into a tale about water mountains and how the boats they rode in would go under and over them. "Gentle hills of water are nice; as they help the boats move forward, and sometimes backwards. Once they rise to mountains, they can fill a

boat with water, or dash it onto the shore in more pieces than you can count."

"Is that what happened to Kees?"

He nodded. "I guess I don't want to think about it anymore. Tell me more about Corandra."

Rusty and Ambrena shared stories with Marken. Corandra and all the fights she started were almost funny now. It was good to laugh again. Perhaps she and Glenna could find peace, even without Zande.

Brix and Jasey rode close behind, keeping an eye on Vendon and Xile tied to one elephant's back.

"Has anyone ever told you the name of the group your friends joined?" Marken said.

"No. I don't remember Uden well. She left as soon as Corandra and Henry could eat on their own. I don't think they remember her at all." If she had stayed around, perhaps Corandra would have someone else to dampen her temper. Or, make it worse.

Tall grass gave way to a sandy lakeshore with patches of brushy trees along the edges. Dark hazy patches rose in the far distance, across the lake. They might be mountains.

"A break would be good," Rusty said.

"Elephants can swim. I don't know how deep the water is though." Marken slipped to the ground while his elephant drank.

"Or, if there are any Kafa monsters here." Ambrena's elephant showered the air above them with water.

Rusty shivered. They had to cross, and nearby, if they could.

She walked down the shoreline, stopping well before a pile of brush. She glanced through the brush, and saw no signs of people. No need to fear everyone. The lake spread as far she could see in front and to the sides. Beyond the lake, dark patches touched the sky. If they were mountains, they didn't look like much from here. Pebbles moved under her feet. She touched one. It rolled into a footprint.

People had been here since the last rain. Who were they, and where were they?

Rusty followed the footprints closer to the brush pile. "Marken, Ambrena, someone's been here."

They walked up beside her.

"Is anyone here?" Marken said aloud.

No response.

"Let me follow the prints. Maybe I can find them." Rusty led the way around the brush pile. The prints appeared to be one person. They couldn't have been Corandra. She hadn't found this lake when she ran off, had she? No female villa member other than Corandra, and her mother, had ever been known to choose to travel alone.

Chapter 31

Grass crunched under Ambrena's feet as she followed Rusty and Marken. Something about this place made her nervous. It didn't feel safe. She gripped her club. It wasn't wild animals she was afraid of. Wild people could be far more dangerous when cornered.

When they stepped around the brushy corner, she realized why. Even without the trees, this beach was almost identical to Kafa Sighting.

She wanted to close her eyes, and didn't dare. "Rusty, I don't like this place."

"Let's take the elephants. You all ride and watch the footprints." Rusty started back.

Ambrena glanced at the beach area again. Somehow, she felt as if someone, or something, was watching her. Her spine tingled.

"Uden, if you are here, please show yourself." She followed Rusty and Marken.

They walked the elephants past the beach opening.

"Any more footprints?" Ambrena asked.

Rusty studied the ground. "They look a few days old. Uden and Fendon usually arrive at Tuttle before Fall Trade. We may have missed them."

"She never comes alone," Ambrena said.

Rusty looked up at her on the elephant's back. "If Fendon died, she might."

Ambrena looked at the desolate shore. It didn't share its secrets. "Follow the tracks, I guess."

Rusty walked ahead, glancing from side to side, and moving grass stalks out of her way. She turned this way and that trying to follow the lone set of tracks. Another brush pile blocked her path. This one looked different.

"Uden, Fendon, Jorn. Are you here?" Rusty called as she pushed her way into the brush.

"I hope there's no spiders in there," Ambrena said.

"Bound to be some," Marken said.

Rusty stepped back out, carrying a piece of cloth. She handed it up to Ambrena. "Looks like Nala's special weave. See, the colors, and the grain match."

Ambrena took the piece of tattered cloth. It did look like Nala's. In fact, it looked like a piece of one the mats by the fire when they visited before they went to Shims.

"There's more cloth in there, and a small gourd. Someone is here, somewhere near."

"Who knows you that might come this way?" Marken asked.

Ambrena slid down to join Rusty. "Quan, Brael, Nala, Dan, and maybe a few other people."

She followed Rusty's trail into the brush. There was a broken water gourd, and more of the cloth that Nala had made. If she had followed them, she could be in danger.

"What size are the footprints?" Ambrena asked as she pushed her way back out of the brush.

Rusty checked with her own foot. "Larger than mine."

"Brix, come check your foot."

His foot was longer than, and almost as wide as the footprints.

"Do you think it's Nala?" Rusty asked.

Brix shook his head. "No. Nala is about your size, not mine. Uden too."

"We better follow the footprints and lead the elephants," Marken said.

They checked the ropes holding Vendon and Xile to be sure they were well knotted. Jasey would watch them.

Ambrena didn't like leaving them like this, since she was a healer, and not a killer. Deep down, she knew those two men would kill her, and every one of the Pit Miners, if they had the chance. Satisfied they couldn't escape, and weren't in serious danger, she nodded to Jasey and rejoined Rusty, Marken, and Brix at the front of the elephant herd.

They followed the prints down the beach. They crossed, and crisscrossed, in many places. Branches and shrub brush had been pulled along the path.

A band of wild dogs ran across the path chasing a rabbit.

An opening in the brush lead again to the lake's beach.

Ambrena paused, almost afraid to look. Illness in one villa could bring fear in another. That fear could feed into a danger as great as the danger she barely remembered from early childhood. If Dan had run away, he must have had good reason. Someone may have

threatened him more openly than in the past. Perhaps they should let him travel alone to wherever he was going, and continue their search without finding him.

"Rusty, I don't think we should find Dan. If he's scared." Ambrena shivered, and pulled a blanket close on her shoulders.

"Brix and Marken are here. He won't be afraid of us. In fact, Brix, Marken, you stay back here until we call." Rusty stepped beyond the brush.

Ambrena gulped and followed her. She mustn't show her fear. Dan shouldn't be afraid of them.

They stepped forward onto the sunny beach.

A pile of brush clumped together. A man's back was to them.

"Dan, is that you?" Rusty asked.

The man jumped and turned around. He sat back on his heels a sharp rock in his hand. "I tried to find you. We have to find Jorn, now. It's late already."

Ambrena relaxed. "You could have come with us."

"No. I had to stay. Where are Brix and Jasey?"

"Brix, Marken, come on," Rusty said.

Brix and Marken joined them on the beach.

The elephants thundered down to the water to wade.

Jasey slipped off and sat beside them as well.

The elephant with Vendon and Xile hanging on stayed close to shore, while the others waded further out, up to their bellies.

"It's great to see you Dan," Ambrena said.

He frowned at the sight of Vendon and Xile. "I can see you've had trouble. Where are your horses, and Jasey's camel?"

"Hopefully finding the people of Shims. We need their help as well." Rusty sat on the pile of brush.

Marken sat down. "Ambrena and Rusty told me you were once a roamer."

Dan shook his head. "Not exactly. I grew up without a mother in Webbel. Blake put me in charge of some of the roamers. I was about as old as Rusty, and scared."

Marken leaned forward. "We can use your help to decide what to do about Vendon and Xile. And the damage they've done."

Dan closed his eyes. "Passing judgment is something I want to avoid. I ran to find Rusty and Ambrena. The news isn't good."

Ambrena touched his hand. It was obvious he was hurting. "Bad news from Shells?"

An elephant trumpeted and sprayed cold water on the group.

They stood up and backed off from the lake.

Dan watched the elephant herd relax in the water. "No news from them. We had the news you were captured, and another group of roamers had been seen by scouts. I knew we needed Jorn then. We need all the people related to us we can find."

Marken groaned. "It must be Tree Burb." He hid his face in his hands.

"Vendon and Xile should never have raided them!" Marken's body shook. "What can I do to fix it?"

Ambrena touched his shoulder. "We need to know, are the rest of Kees like Vendon and Xile?"

Marken calmed down. "No. Most are nice. Like people anywhere. I think they do tend to jump a little faster than my burb. Our secret name for them was always Spider; because you never knew when they might jump at you."

Rusty and Brix chuckled.

"I want to know about Tree Burb," Dan said.

Marken told him everything he had told Ambrena and Rusty. "Tree Burb people are river hunters, more even than Kees. I rarely talked to them. So, I don't know them well. I hope they don't attack your villas thinking they are Kees."

Dan clenched his fists. "We have kept to ourselves too long. We need to reach out and know our neighbors so this harmful disease can't spread again."

He pointed to the pile of brush. "After Rusty and Ambrena left, I had Nala's daughter ask around. People will tell her anything. They think Jorn, Uden, and Fendon live in a villa called Leana across this lake. At least, I hope I found the right lake."

"You were going to cross on that?" Marken walked over to the pile of brush woven together. Glancing out as far as he could see, he looked back. "You wouldn't make it half way. The water would soak through."

Dan lowered his head. "I had to try something. We need them."

He lifted his eyes and looked at Marken. "And they may need us before this is over. I'm going, and you can't stop me." He stood up and grabbed more brush to weave into the pile.

Marken looked to Ambrena. "We will go. Not on that. The elephants can swim. We have to decide what to do with Vendon and Xile."

Dan glanced up at him. "We could put them on the raft, and if it falls apart, we won't have to worry about them anymore."

Ambrena gasped.

Dan's stormy face turned to her. "Let the Goddess's wills be done. We have to hurry."

Marken stopped him. "We will hurry. I have an idea though. The rest of you eat, while I fix up the brush for the trip. It should make it. I know more about boats than you do. And we can ride the elephants."

"You need to eat too," Ambrena said.

"I will, as soon as we are on the elephants. I have to take care of you all far better than I did of Yall." He turned away from her.

Ambrena wished she could comfort Marken. It wasn't his fault.

They ate travel food as quickly and quietly as they could.

Marken tied the brush pile behind one elephant and laced two of the Kees' huntboards onto it.

"Brix, help me. We'll tie Vendon on his own huntboard and see how well he likes to ride on it."

Marken and Brix struggled with Vendon, as he kicked and tried to free himself from their grasp. A cloth in his mouth kept him from screaming and scaring the elephants. Xile didn't fight. His eyes glared as they laced him to his huntboard on the uneven pile of brush.

Marken, Dan, Brix, and Jasey pushed the strapped men into the water. The raft floated, and it bounced on the waves.

The elephants were wet and slippery, so reaching their backs was even more difficult than on dry land.

Ambrena lagged behind. She had always followed Rusty, as had many others. If Rusty made the wrong decision, would the Pit Miners hold it against Ambrena and Brix for following her? They could have turned back now, and fought if needed. Somehow, they had to find help.

Brix held out his hand to her.

If he were worried, he'd have let her know. Even Jasey seemed content. They could read the trails better than she could. Perhaps they knew something she didn't.

Across this lake, a villa waited. How they would react to a herd of elephants and people they didn't know, waited to be seen. Oh how she wished to be in Tanna's lodge, a little girl again, with no worries.

Chapter 32

The river crossing gleamed. A short break was all Corandra and Ida had taken. They had to find Wenda and the rest of the Pit Miners before daybreak.

Ida stared at the crossing. "I've never been beyond the river. We will have to go slower to follow the trail. At least the moon is shining bright."

This trip had rattled Corandra. Ellie was starting to slow. She had never worked so hard in her short life. "I'll lead."

"Have you swum on Ellie before?"

Corandra nodded. She urged Ellie forward.

Ellie surged into the stream, swimming across the current.

Icy water splashed Corandra.

Clouds temporarily covered the moon.

Wenda would set up camp somewhere they could find. The trail should be nearby.

She walked Ellie up the bank of the river. They had drifted downstream as they swam across. Brush blocked the path in places. Pushing it aside, she urged Ellie on. One trail glistened in the moonlight.

Corandra paused to examine it. No, it was too thin, and glistened too well. That trail had to be an old animal trail, perhaps a wild horse herd visited here for water regularly.

Ellie walked further along the bank finding another trail leading in the correct direction. She sniffed, and turned to follow it.

Corandra let her go; this had to be the trail.

Ida rode beside her. "Normally, Wenda would leave a token. Tonight, I'm not so sure."

"We have to find her. We need all the help we have to rescue Henry. Zella will disown me if he doesn't return to Shells."

Ida laughed. "You told him to go back to Shells. Zella will know that."

"It'll be my fault. Like everything else." Corandra urged Ellie ahead of Ida, and raced through the moonlight.

Ellie fought to slow down, to avoid tripping over exposed roots.

Being torn between who to rescue first was something Corandra never planned on. If she had left Shells sooner, Rusty and Ambrena

would never have left Shims, or even Shells. Henry would have been safe with his sister. Zande would still be alive, never having found the red box.

Zella didn't want this to happen to another gen. It wouldn't have. No one else would make the mistakes she had made, they'd know better. She had to fix them, right what she broke, and then find her own world, far from Shells, and the Pit Miners. Her throat burned as she fought to hold back her feelings.

Focusing on the ride in front of her was what mattered. People always said she jumped into making mistakes without thinking. Wouldn't they laugh if they could see her now.

The night lagged into the early morning, and still no sign of Wenda, or the camp. Corandra dozed on Ellie's back. It wouldn't help anyone to fall off. "We have to talk to stay awake. If our scouts hear us, it'll be good."

"I'm tired too."

Ellie stopped in the trail.

Ida's camel almost ran over top of them.

A boulder sat in the middle of the trail, on top of recently trampled grass.

"There are her marks. We turn here. Follow me." Ida led the way through a tiny opening in the grass.

The trail was barely wide enough for the camels without breaking stalks of grass. It twisted and turned, leading further from the main path. If it were a wild animal trail, surely Ida would have backed out by now.

Through the grass, a glimmer flickered.

Corandra took a deep breath. They were about to find someone. Whether their friends, or the roamers, she didn't know.

Ida's camel stopped, blocking the path. She raised her hand and tilted her ear toward the clearing. "I think it is our camp. Follow quietly."

Stepping through the grass into camp was like stepping into a tale of the ancients. Corandra had never been on a hunter's multi-day trip, and even then, no more than five ever went together. This camp was most of the adults in five villas huddled together near a fire, with their horses and camels in a ring around them.

Ida peeked over the horses in front of her. "It's them. Let's find Wenda."

She jumped off her camel and tied her to the nearest horse.

Corandra stayed on Ellie, and followed Ida through the horse circle. Ellie would follow her if she tried to leave her behind.

Wenda sat next to the fire, in much the same way Quan had sat last evening. Staring into the flickering flames, and not seeing those around her.

Corandra pulled her gatherboard to her chest as she slipped off Ellie.

Wenda looked up as they approached. "Henry?"

Ida shook her head and sat down. In a few words, their journey spilled out.

Wenda handed them food and water. "This does not sound good. Does Quan want us to return to protect the villas?"

"He did not say." Ida glanced long at Wenda then took a bite of nutria jerky.

Some thought or meaning had to pass in that look, though what it was, Corandra did not know. "If they go there, and only children and the oldest are there, will the tree people ignore them?"

Wenda took her hands. "We must hold a council at first light. That isn't far away. Rest now, I must think."

Ida stretched out on the ground. "I think Quan will send a runner to Shells at dawn."

Wenda's eyes closed. "I do not know what Goddess Amber would want us to do. Find our people. Or protect our villas."

"I wish I knew. Do you think Goddess Amber and Goddess Kafa wish to no longer be connected?" Corandra knew sleep would not come with the question on her mind.

"It is possible. We've had a double day. Nap now." Ida snuggled into her shawl.

Corandra's mind whirled like the dust storms. She must decide what would be best, so the villas could go on with life uninterrupted. Now, that was no longer possible. What had the ghost of her sponsor dredged in Shelpit? Whatever it was, it had continued to bring them sorrow.

A cold drop of rain splattered across her nose, waking her with a start.

Wenda sat by the fire. "Not a good day for travel. We may lose the trail. Everyone awake, wake your neighbor. Council now."

The people murmured as they struggled awake and into a sitting position. Most had never spent a night in the open, far from a villa, other than for Fall and Spring Trade. They grunted as they pulled food from gatherboards and turned to Wenda.

Wenda watched Corandra.

Corandra's face turned red as she waited with the crowd. "Are you going to start the meeting?"

Wenda's voice chilled. "This is your journey to rescue your friends and my son. You're supposed to be in charge. Since you returned after running off, I expected you to want to resume leadership."

The people behind her murmured. No one had ever spoken to her like that in front of a crowd. Even in private, Zella had reprimanded her more gently. Her ears burned as she stared open mouthed at Wenda. Water brimmed in her eyes, whether rain, or tears, she was unsure.

"They aren't my friends. I wish they were. I don't know why Jasey and Brix went with them."

Wenda leaned forward. "Jasey's camel, and the other three horses, are all here with us. Where are the riders; and what happened? Give it to the people to decide what to do."

"When did the horses come back?"

"At dusk. I didn't tell you when you arrived so you would sleep at least some. I fear they are no longer among the living." Wenda reached in her gatherboard and pulled out a scrap of cloth. Red tinged with green.

Corandra glanced up in horror. No young woman from Shells would give up first choice cloth lightly. "Rusty and Ambrena are in trouble. I have to go at once!"

"And forget your responsibilities as you did yesterday!" Wenda shoved the material back in her pack.

"My son is out there too. Lost somewhere. Who knows what they did to him. He will never be able to tell me." Wenda crooned.

Ida tried to comfort Wenda.

Jasey couldn't speak. His lack of words could mean that unspeakable things could be done to him, and they should try to

rescue them now, and not later. If they could find them. "Ellie! We're leaving."

She grabbed her gatherboard and pushed her way through the crowd.

Wenda grabbed her arm. Water dripped down her face. "I am not letting you ignore your responsibilities. Tanna, Robin, Zella, and Dover have pandered to you far too long!" Her arm squeezed tight.

Corandra couldn't pull away.

"They must be afraid of you. No other reason they would allow you to continue with your behavior. No one else would consider behaving so badly." Wenda shoved her to the ground.

The crowd gasped.

"Don't spread the evil. We will find Jasey and Brix." Ida pulled Wenda back.

Ida turned to Corandra. "Please try."

Corandra's legs shook as she stood. "I think everyone needs to go back to Shells to protect our villas. If we have no lodges, or food for the winter, finding Rusty, Ambrena, Brix, and Jasey will do no good. I will go on alone."

Ida touched her arm gently. "Aren't we supposed to decide as a group?"

Corandra turned to the silent crowd. "Does anyone want to stay out here lost? We will not be able to find the trail easily. It will be far too muddy soon for a large group to pass. I am going on."

The group murmured. "If we return who will lead us?"

"Wenda will, as always," Corandra said. She is a far better leader than me.

"No. We would allow Ida to lead us," one person said, and many clapped.

Oh no, my behavior has now caused the Pit Miners to turn against their hunting leader. Corandra turned to face Wenda.

Ida let go of Wenda. "Wenda and I will go with Corandra. Brael and Lavina will return with the group to Shims. You are all needed there. Go now."

As the people gathered their supplies and followed Lavina's lead, Brael stayed behind. "Are you sure the three of you should go on alone?"

"I'm sorry for my outburst. I am worried about Jasey." Wenda nodded.

Brael touched her arm. "I know you are. That is why I think you should do what you do best. I also know it's next to impossible to sit and wait to see if he is safe."

Wenda looked up into Brael's eyes. "Do you think?"

Brael took her hand and helped her up. "I think you need tea. I also think, I am needed more with Corandra and Ida if they find Jasey, Brix, Ambrena, and Rusty."

Wenda glanced at Ida.

Ida nodded. "You will be needed to protect Shims. Put your anger to protection. We will be back as soon as we can. I'll keep up with Corandra."

Wenda picked up her gatherboard, slung it on her shoulder, and walked off.

As she left, the gentle rain became a downpour.

"We better be going before the trail washes away," Brael said. "Corandra, you okay?"

Corandra nodded. She picked up her sodden gatherboard and readied Ellie for the trip. The Goddess's were covering the tracks they had to follow. The rest of the group could go back, if they made it across the river before it flooded. She fought to hold back a sob. Once they started on the track, she could cry, and no one would know.

"Ellie, find the trail. We have to find Rusty and Ambrena."

Chapter 33

Rusty's elephant rolled under her as it swam across the lake.

The breeze picked up. The opposite shore appeared to sway and ripple. Waves swelled under the massive elephants. Clouds gathered overhead, dimming the sun to a chilly day as winter approached.

If the illness hadn't happened, they would all be safe around a bonfire celebrating the Fall Trade. Trading stories, listening to music, eating good food, and preparing cloth in preparation for the cold ahead. She had many artifacts from Shelpit to share among the various villas. While Shells was isolated due to the illness, the other villas would have to go on with the Fall Trade without them soon, if she and Ambrena couldn't find help. Even now, they might be gathering, though where, she couldn't guess. Shells had a gathering ground large enough, no other villa did.

Water swashed and gurgled. Currents pulled at the elephants as they splashed toward land.

The pile of brush carrying Vendon and Xile tugged, and tried to break loose from the elephant Marken rode. "Marken, behind you!"

Brush shifted and tangled in an elephant's legs.

The elephant trumpeted and kicked to escape the entangling limbs.

Marken struggled to stay on its back. He jerked the cords loose. The brush drifted further away. "Stay with the elephants!" He jumped into the water and swam to the floating men on huntboards.

Rusty pulled her elephant back. It couldn't gain traction, or stop like on land. She slowly turned it around, splashed and splattered to the pile of brush covered with water.

Once her elephant was behind it, Marken climbed up behind her.

Rusty then urged the elephant to push the brush carrying Vendon and Xile in front of them.

Their struggles had pushed them further away from the rest of the group. Ambrena, Brix, and Jasey were less able to control their individual elephants, and certainly not the extra two. Marken's elephant had swum to join its friends.

They were almost across the lake now. Movement was visible on the shore. Though impossible to determine if was people or animals. If Uden, Fendon, and Jorn were here, they would be scared of people on elephants. They wouldn't recognize anyone in this group. The people who may be their friends would run and hide, and might be difficult to find. Why hadn't they talked about, and planned for a possible separation before they left the other side?

Ambrena, Brix, and Jasey were in the distance. Even a hand wave wouldn't be visible from here.

At least Marken can help, Rusty thought. There was no way she and Marken alone could hang Vendon and Xile onto her lone elephant. And this elephant couldn't drag them far on land because the brush would fall apart. They'd be stuck at the water's edge until the rest of the group could catch up. If they could. Marken was more used to controlling the elephants. Brix and Jasey would try. Ambrena would have great difficulty, since she only rode gentle horses.

The elephant placed her legs on dry ground, and pulled the brush pile to shore.

Rusty and Marken slid off.

"What do we do now?" Rusty asked.

Marken glanced at the elephant, the men on huntboards, and back at Rusty. "You walk ahead and watch for people. I'll help the elephant pull them at the water's edge. If we stay a body length off shore, we shouldn't be pulled out into the current."

Rusty pulled her gatherboard close. Nearby was a stick that would be perfect to protect her in case of a snake, without appearing too threatening to anyone friendly. She walked along the beach toward her out of sight friends. Marken stayed behind, and in the water.

It might help if she spoke. Even if no one answered, people had to be watching and listening from the nearby brush. "Uden, Fendon, Jorn, we are trying to find you."

The brush fluttered. A bird jumped out and ran down the beach. One of those not quite chickens; and not good eating birds.

Once her heart calmed down, Rusty continued around the bend. Hopefully, they would meet Ambrena, Brix, and Jasey soon. They should have landed not too far away.

Indentions ahead of her turned into letters as she approached. She stopped. "Marken, wait."

"What is it?"

"Sand words. Let me think." Rusty traced each letter, and tried to remember all of Zella's teachings from so long ago. She had never been one to play the word games. That was Ambrena. The letters made no sense. Perhaps they spoke differently on this side of the lake. "Way." That could mean to "go away," or "come this way."

"Uden, are you here? Corandra's mother, we need you. These people you joined, we need help."

The brush rustled and a woman stepped out.

Could this really be Uden? Rusty could barely remember her. Uden had been gone too long.

The woman pointed at the elephant.

"It will bring you no harm. We were separated from our three friends and the other elephants."

"Is Corandra with you?" The woman's hands shook as she held onto a brushy tree.

Rusty shook her head. "No. I am sure she wishes she was. Can we meet with you and your villa?"

"No. They are scared of the animals."

Rusty stepped closer. "You are Uden?"

She nodded. "I was once called that. I am Treny now."

The pile of brush the huntboards were on was separating, threatening to drop the tied bodies into the waves. "Rusty, I'm going on before Xile and Vendon fall into the water. Wouldn't want them to drown this close to shore." Marken urged the elephant on.

Treny stepped out onto the beach. "You have more with you?"

"Vendon and Xile are tied up. We almost lost them, which is why we were separated from Ambrena, Brix, Jasey, and the other elephants. Please help us Treny. If you help us, you may save Corandra." Rusty reached out to the woman who shivered at her words.

"I have a villa to protect myself. Though Leana calls itself a maze." Treny walked to the water's edge to see the pile of brush the men were on.

"Does Leana visit other people?" Rusty asked.

Marken led the elephant on down the beach.

"We have boats. Hunting on both land and water, we meet a few other villas. Some trade occurs."

Rusty put her hand on Treny's arm. "Vendon and Xile attacked us. They would have hurt us. Marken told us of another group that may attack our villas because of what Vendon and Xile did to their villa. Corandra needs you."

Treny covered her eyes. "She has Zella and Tanna for a mother."

"Corandra needs you. We all do," Rusty said. Ambrena would know how to convince her. One of her best skills.

A young girl, barely past toddlerhood, stepped out of the brush pile. "Momma?"

Rusty closed her eyes. Of course, Treny had another child, or maybe two.

"It'll be okay." Treny pulled the girl close.

She looked up at her mother. "You aren't going, are you?"

Treny sat on her heels and looked in the face of the girl. "Would you like to meet your older sister?"

The girl nodded and rubbed her eyes with her fists.

Treny closed her eyes and hugged the child tight. "Go and gather the maze of Leana to the boat beach."

The girl wiggled away, and wiped her eyes, before she ran back into the brush.

"I did what I thought was best. Now, we will meet your friends, and let my villa decide their choice." Treny walked on down the beach.

Rusty followed. "Do you remember me at all?"

Treny pushed aside some brush on the beach, and the bones of an animal. "You were so smart. Always doing something to help others. I knew you would be good for Corandra. Sadly, the gen four grandmother and Zella were right. The more Corandra grew, the less I could be around her. She seemed to always need so much. People looked at me with pity and fear."

"Are Fendon and Jorn here with you?"

Treny glanced out across the lake, and ahead to where the elephants waited on them. "They went on a short hunt trip. They'll be back soon."

"Tell me more about Leana." Rusty pushed branches out of the way as they crept across fallen logs.

"Not much different from Shells, other than the boats. And no bad memories," Treny said.

Better not to remind her of the past Rusty needed her to face.

"Did your nutria eat your garden this summer?"

A fish nearby slapped the water.

"No, we had enough water from the lake to make it through the drought. I'll show you how sometime. I do miss Zella's nutria stew."

They hurried on in silence to the gathering crowd.

At the clearing Treny stopped beside some trees. "Go, tell your friends."

Rusty glanced at her lined face, and ran to Ambrena.

Chapter 34

Ambrena tried to steer her elephant away from strange shapes in the water, toward where Marken and Rusty had landed.

The elephants made every effort to ignore her pleas, and those of Brix and Jasey. They scrambled up onto the lakeshore by the strange wood pieces nodding in the water. Wood pieces that parted to make more room for the water the elephants let loose as their legs and backs drained.

"What are they?" Ambrena asked.

Brix slid down and walked over to the objects. "Bits of trees. Far larger trees than I can see here. They remind me of a few boats I have seen."

Ambrena slid off and walked over to Brix. "Jasey, keep the elephants here."

The dark colored wood pieces floated and bounced in the current. They would be useful in Lake Kafa, if people weren't so afraid of the Kafa Goddess. Rusty would know how they were made. She couldn't be far away.

A few people crept through the brush pile and stared at them, and the elephants. One man held up a spear pointed toward the elephants.

Ambrena searched their faces for Jorn, Fendon, or Uden. She had the faces of Shells to guide her in her search. The faces here were slightly more summery in look, with a more weathered texture, and larger noses than was common among the Pit Miners. Since there had been no contact with this villa, would they understand her speech? Especially if this wasn't the villa Uden, Jorn, and Fendon had gone to.

No one looked like her, Zella, or even Corandra. She hadn't heard anyone speak. Her hands began to shake. More people filed through the brush pile onto the beach, blocking their escape.

A young girl stepped out and walked forward. "Please don't take Momma away."

Ambrena stepped toward her carefully, watching the crowd. She didn't want to scare anyone if they couldn't understand her. She sat beside the girl. "I don't want to take anyone away."

"Momma said you could take us to my sister I don't know. I was excited. Now, I'm scared."

Ambrena wanted to hug the child. Rusty must have found Uden. It would be great for Corandra to have a sister to care for. Maybe it was what she needed.

An unclothed young boy toddled from one of the women.

"Brother can't go with me, can he? I don't want to leave Wit behind."

Wit teetered beside his sister and plopped on the ground. Water dribbled as he sat down.

Someday soon, she'd like to return if she could. This villa might accept her, or at least her skills.

Clouds thickened in the sky. It would not be a good night to return across the lake. She didn't know if the elephants could swim in the stronger currents of much needed rain.

"Ambrena." Marken appeared around the brush leading the elephant Rusty had been riding. "Rusty found your friend. She'll be here soon."

"Are we waiting to move Vendon and Xile?"

Marken strode up the beach to stand beside her. "I'd wait."

His presence made her knees feel weak. She picked up some sand and waited. No one in Shells had ever made her feel this way. Ambrena wanted to be afraid of it. Strange and giddy as the feeling was, it seemed to be a gift, as it also gave her peace, and steadied her reactions to those around her.

Before long, voices could be heard speaking as they approached. One she recognized as Rusty. They came around the bend and through the brush.

Rusty looked at the woman, and then ran straight to Ambrena.

"Oh Ambrena, we have to." She glanced at the children in front of Ambrena.

She stood straight. "Let's join Brix and Jasey. Come on Marken."

They stood out of hearing distance from the crowd. "Uden changed her name to Treny. Not sure about Fendon or Jorn. They are hunting and should return soon."

"Guess she couldn't live with the memories," Ambrena said. "A new villa, a new name. We'll have to tell Tanna and Zella."

"She wants to see Corandra. You have to break through her fear. Ambrena, you are the only one who can!"

Treny shuffled up to them. "I don't want to leave. I'll try to do what I can to convince others to help you though."

Her daughter ran up and grabbed the hem of her shirt. "Momma take me with you."

"I'm not going Shara." Treny sighed.

Shara stomped her foot. "You promised I could meet my missing sister!"

Treny tried to hug the child.

The child pulled away. "You are going, and you will take me this season! Don't leave me behind with the old adults and the babies!"

Another woman, who looked vaguely familiar, plodded up and tried to pull Shara from Treny. "Come now, you are always happy with me. Let your mother talk to her visitors."

Shara pulled away and grabbed Ambrena's hand. "You know, don't you? I have to go. My sister's in trouble, or you wouldn't be here with all those giant animals. I have to save my sister that I don't know. Momma kept her from me."

Treny covered her face and turned away.

Shara was right. It hurt Treny too much. Though the words from her daughter's lips, might be the balm to save them all, including Treny herself.

"Treny, please tell them what you know," Ambrena said.

She shook her head. "You." Treny sat on the beach. She turned her head from view and cried.

Ambrena had no idea where to begin. "Shara, will you sit with me while Rusty explains everything?"

Shara nodded.

The unnamed woman motioned to the people to come close.

Rusty stepped forward and quickly explained what had happened to them, and what Marken had said. "We have to decide what to do with Vendon and Xile. Kees and Tree Burb mustn't attack our villas. If they do, they may hurt you as well. Please help. You are connected to us, and we will help you. We barely have enough food for winter, and a sickness is in Shells."

The woman who had tried to take Shara moved forward while the crowd murmured. "You know Zella well?"

Rusty nodded. "She sent us for help for the sickness in Shells. Zande died in my arms."

Ambrena wanted to reach out to Rusty. If she did now, her friend might break into tears. Whether the tears would deepen the pain, or help it heal, she didn't know.

Shara toddled over to Rusty and grabbed her leg. "Who is Zande?"

Rusty wiped her eyes. "A child who wasn't my own, close to your age. I treated him as my own." Her voice broke.

The woman turned to the crowd. "My mother came here much as Treny did. I never met my sister Zella. I feel the grief that Shara knows all too well. I do not wish her to live that way forever, never knowing her sister. We must help these villas. They are our family as well."

The woman turned to Ambrena. "I am Falena. My mother wanted to forget and tie herself to Leana, like Treny did. I've always felt as if half of my life were missing. Unknown, and possibly in danger."

"Jorn, Treny, and Fendon came. Didn't they tell you of Zella?" Ambrena asked.

"Yes. They told me. I think half the reason they went back each Fall and Spring Trade was to keep information flowing to me of my missing sister. She didn't know about me, and I never was sure about how she would react to finding out I exist." Falena traced a line in the sand with her toe. "Zella will want to know why I waited. I hope it hasn't been too long. I always thought, if she saw me, she'd know. I'd go near the villas and watch the people while Fendon and Treny spoke with someone they knew."

Shara reached for Falena's hand. "We can go? Now?"

Falena squeezed her hand. "At daybreak. It will be dark soon, and we have much to prepare. When the hunters return, we will prepare the meat, and decide who will stay and who will go. You must care for Wit while helping."

"Come on. I can go find my sister." Shara ran off into the brush.

Shara would be a handful, like her older sister. Ambrena smiled and stood up. "I am sorry we must impose on you, and the rest of Leana."

Falena held out her hands. "We have much to learn from each other."

Ambrena took her hand. The sky grew darker.

"Can we cross after the rain?"

Someone she didn't know spoke. "Sure. It won't be as easy. We can do it though."

"I saw letters in the sand. I didn't know what they meant," Rusty said.

"Leana's Goddess likes to have her name written in the sand by the water's edge. When it rains, we repair it, and add tree bark and roots. It brings the nutria out. They keep coming back on their own," Treny said.

"A good way to catch them," Ambrena said.

"The nets we use for fishing grab them. We can drop them on them from the trees, and choose which ones to keep for food and furs. They may be wilder than Zella's, though they are fun to watch play in the water," Treny said.

Chapter 35

Rain puddled around the fire. Much needed rain to end the growing season drought. Except it was too late. Growing season was long over. Now, it would create a cold, squishy mud for the Pit Miners to try to save their lodges in.

Corandra urged Ellie to follow the trail. Neither normally ventured out in the rain. She had no choice. There would be no nutria stew at the end of the ride to warm her up. She pulled her furs tighter around her shoulders.

Brael and Ida rode beside her.

The drizzle made the path of broken grass slippery. No sign of daylight, or a break in the clouds. Corandra covered her neck to keep it dry as Zella had taught her. No one spoke as they focused on searching for any clues that may have been left by Ambrena or Rusty.

Tanna's dogs could find Rusty and Ambrena anywhere. The dogs usually ran from her though, so she hadn't bothered to look for one to bring. Ida and Brael hadn't mentioned bringing one either. No one had expected rain after such a long drought.

Slipping and sliding through the wet grass exhausted Corandra. She closed her eyes and dozed from lack of sleep.

Ellie stopped before a large fire pit.

Corandra slid off and walked to the sodden ashes. A line of stones tripped her. She dusted herself off and walked around the pit, looking for anything that belonged to Rusty or Ambrena. If they had been here, they were nowhere in sight now. There was no visible lodge for humans, though an ultra large herd lodge loomed in the dreary distance.

She covered her head as the rain pounded heavier. A path led to the herd lodge. If they had been here, she would find them. Somehow.

Ida and Brael searched the surrounding area as well.

"There's a mining pit over here, looks ankle deep in water," Brael said. "No one in it though. I think they've been here. The order in which the pit has been recently dug is as precise as Rusty would leave it."

"The herd lodge shows signs of stones being moved recently. As well as digging between the rings. See anything helpful Corandra?" Ida said.

"There is a path, much more narrow over in that direction, leading further away," Corandra pointed. If they travelled further from Shims, it would be more difficult to find the missing people, and they might run out of food themselves.

"I think the storm will lighten up soon. Let's go over to the brush, rest, and eat before we go on," Brael said.

"I wish I knew why they went on." Corandra walked on into the brush beyond Ida and Brael. There was a tiny, new path, little more than an animal trail. She took her food and followed it.

"Don't be long!" Ida said.

"I'll watch for snakes." The trail led to a tiny clearing with a small, tall, stone lodge in the center.

Corandra gasped. "Rusty, Ambrena, are you here?" She stepped into the clearing, and ran for the open entry. Inside, it was almost too dark to see. No people; alive, or otherwise. Several boxes on a table with something shiny beside them. There were footprints in the dirt. She turned to step back outside.

The order of the boxes was familiar, like something she had seen somewhere before. She shook her head. That made no sense, unless it was something Zella had shown her.

After a quick meal, and no sign of Rusty, Ambrena, Jasey, or Brix anywhere, they followed the smaller path away from the campsite.

"I'm glad you sent Wenda back," Ida said. "Seeing this place, and still no sign of her son, would have been too much for her."

"I hope we find them soon." Corandra covered her eyes, and peered ahead.

Clouds still sprinkled as they followed the trail that led further from Shims.

"I hope so too. What you found may make a difference. I didn't see any signs of a fight, though I did see scuffle marks near the fire. If it hadn't rained so much I might have been able to read what had happened." Ida's horse slid on the muddy trail. She pulled her horse off to the side, to check her feet.

Corandra followed the trail silently. It looked as if the elephants had traveled one behind the other. Rain slowly cleared away and wisps of sunlight slipped through to the ground. A lake, dark as the night sky shifted into view beside them.

Elephant tracks led in and out of brush piles. At one place, there were signs that people had stayed still for a while. The animals had gone into the water, and not come out nearby. Something had also been pushed into the water. The choppy waves had washed too much sand and mud away, to make out what it could have been. Rusty and Ambrena wouldn't willingly cross a lake. That was something she would do, no one else would consider it.

"We'll look on down," Ida said.

"I think they went across the water. Something was dragged out into the lake. I have to find them." Corandra pushed Ellie into the water to check up and down the beach.

Beyond the brush pile, footprints led north.

She followed, and yelled for Ida and Brael. "Someone walked this way, let's go!" As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she knew better. Those were single footprints, and not from a group of four or more. Anyone could have made them.

The prints showed slowing footsteps, with an occasional round indention beside them. The indention seemed strange. Ahead, driftwood slapped the sandy beach. It wasn't floating away on the heavy waves from the lake. There was a lot of driftwood, almost enough to build a lodge.

Corandra turned up onto shore to avoid the driftwood. Many footprints were all over the sandy beach here, as well as elephant prints. Questions raced through her mind, so many, she couldn't put them into words.

"Stop," A voice said.

Ellie froze.

Corandra nearly tumbled off when she saw a man and two young adults sitting next to the bobbing driftwood. "Who are you?"

The old man grinned up at her, "Not afraid huh? Tell me who you are."

The heat rose in her cheeks. Everyone knew who she was. "If you don't know who I am, I'll."

"That's enough!" Ida rode around the brush pile.

She rode up to the man and glared at him. "Do we know you?"

He glanced down at the crossed hands in his lap. "Once you did. Once I led many villas. Now, I lead no one."

"You live alone?"

"No," he shook his head. "I simply gave up leading others. These young men are in charge of our boats, and I merely follow along now."

"You must be Jorn. Where are Uden and Fendon?"

"Uden changed her name to Treny. This must be her wild, untamable, older daughter."

Corandra gulped and nodded. "Where is my mother? Has she been captured too?"

"No. We are here to guard the boats. Treny went with Rusty and Ambrena to take medical help, and hunters as well, to Shims and Shells. Seems they need more neighbors."

"Then, I must find my mother." Corandra turned Ellie away from the man. "Which way did she go?"

Jorn stood up and stopped Ellie from moving. "Henry isn't with you."

Corandra gulped. "He was attacked and taken by the Tree People. Wenda went back for him."

"Wouldn't you rather save him?"

"All of the danger that our villas are in, is my fault. I have to fix it. Meeting my mother will help." She tried to encourage Ellie to go around Jorn.

Jorn stopped her again. "She's almost ready. Not quite. Rusty and Ambrena said some things, and I wasn't able to think about all of them before they left this morning. I will take you to Mills for help. We will need them too."

Corandra glanced out at the placid lake. Would the Kafa Goddess hear her if she asked for help? "Henry wanted to go to them. How can they help?"

"In many ways. We will walk. Near evening we will reach them." Jorn picked up a huntboard and stalked to the northeast.

If Jorn were correct, and Mills could help them, they should look for all the help they could find. He had said her mother wasn't ready to see her. Corandra would have to prove she could be responsible by not running away. Finding out the truth about Henry, Rusty, and

her own sponsor would surely go a long way in making the people in Shells accept her, or send her away permanently.

"Point the way, and I'll ride ahead to watch for trouble." If Jorn saw her as successful, he would know she could be a leader.

"No," Jorn said. "We are four, we will stay together."

Corandra grumbled. "What do they have that will help us, besides knowing where Rusty and Henry's sponsor came from?"

Jorn looked up at her. "I could say you'll see. Let me think of how to describe what I know."

They walked on in silence. Birds flapped overhead. Bugs chirped in the tall grass. Wolves and wild dogs howled far away.

Corandra shivered. Mills might be deserted. Perhaps it had been attacked and the wolves were dismantling the dead. For Henry and Rusty, she had to find out the truth. Somehow, she had to stop the evil happening to the Pit Miners.

Chapter 36

"I'll wait here, with Vendon and Xile," Brix said.

Jasey nodded.

No point in taking them to the villa tonight to return to the lake in the morning. Rusty didn't mind. She'd rather not see the two men tied to the huntboards.

The elephants tramped behind the people as they walked to Leana. The narrow path from the beach widened as their bodies pushed through. Bushes snapped, and dogs barked and snapped at their massive feet.

Rusty walked beside Dan, who guided the great beasts.

In the villa of Leana, people gathered around the central fire area. It wasn't so different from Shells. Marken and Ambrena urged the elephants to an open area beyond the villa. Most of the people were quiet. Dogs ran, tails between their legs as the giant beasts lumbered between the lodges.

After a meal, the people of Leana took the four strangers to an empty lodge to share for the night. Fendon and Jorn had not returned from hunting. They would not leave in the morning, unless they did return. Rain pattered on the outside of the lodge towards early morning. A thin daylight crept across the landscape. A drizzling rain continued.

At the morning meal, Fendon, Jorn, and another man arrived with zebra meat to string up and dry at the fire pit.

"The elephants surprised us," Jorn said. "We've not captured any animals here. Cows that have been in Leana's herds as far back as they remember, are all we have." He chewed a piece of steak.

Rusty laughed. "Not sure we'll keep them either. They are helpful for now. I'm the dig leader for the Pit Miners."

He nodded. "I know. Zella must be proud of you."

Rusty glanced down at her twisting hands. "If she were, I don't think she'd send me away. Of course, Shelpit is almost empty, and we may have to move. Sickness took little Zande. I miss him so. We are all afraid to dig anymore in Shelpit." She stared into the fire. Maybe that was why Zella sent her away. To find a new location for Shells.

Jorn sat the empty water gourd on the ground. "We don't dig here. We trade with a couple of villas further out, and most of them don't mine anymore either."

Rusty stirred the fire beyond her feet. "Do you think all the pit mines our ancestors left are empty?"

He leaned back and looked at the roof. "Yes and no. There are definitely some, somewhere untouched. However, we may never find them. So many people were killed in the ancient tales; there have to be places people have not returned. Or were killed by buried illnesses like Corandra found."

"I don't blame her. It isn't her fault Zande died. He took the glass out of the box and broke it in his hands. I thought he knew better. I thought he would do good to watch Corandra for us."

Jorn glanced at her. "How old was he?"

Rusty smiled. "A few trade seasons old. I guess Glenna and I spoiled him a bit. I went back to Zella's after he died. I couldn't bear her tears." Her eyes watered at the memory of Glenna holding Zande's body. The private talks they had together before the death ceremonies began. Had she run away from Glenna, even when she thought Glenna pulled away from her? Perhaps there could have been something different she could have done. If she hadn't blamed herself so much, perhaps Glenna might not have blamed her.

Jorn packed his cup in his gatherboard. "Even with the rain, I think everyone will go today."

Rusty glanced up from her memories. "Marken said the boats, are not like the ones he knows."

Jorn nodded. "A child can manage one of these. Shara will begin training next fishing season."

Shouting and laughing outside brought them to the entry.

"We leave as soon as everyone is ready," Falena said.

The trip back across the lake was far wetter than the day before. Rain splattered from the sky, joining the elephant's splashes as they crossed. Once on the other side, Jorn and two young boys stayed with the boats.

"Don't you want to see Zella and Dover again?" Rusty asked.

"Someone needs to stay with the boats. Dan said part of your villas might be looking for you. I'll be here to tell them where you are." Jorn sat on the sandy shore and refused to move.

Rusty glanced from him to the group walking in the direction of Tuttle. "You'll be okay?"

He laughed. "The lake is full of fish. We'll be fine. There is a tiny lodge nearby, we hunters use. Go on! I thought you were the leader now."

She laughed. "I'm the dig leader. Not the travel leader. I think Treny is leading. She knows the way better than we do."

"Well, go on!"

Rusty hurried to catch up with the front of the line. She almost wished they hadn't let their horses go. The elephants travelled behind the main line of people carrying food and shelter for the group. One elephant carried Vendon and Xile, still breathing, and angrier than ever. At least their loud mouths were covered. Quan would call a council to determine their fate.

She shuddered at the site of their glaring eyes under the dripping grass mats.

At the front of the line Treny led, with Shara, Wit, and Falena.

Rusty tagged along behind them, glad to walk without worrying about being lost.

At midday, they pulled the group of people close together, and kept the elephants in a circle around them. The group rested while they ate and talked. Children napped in the shade of the elephants.

Rusty didn't realize she was dozing, until she heard the screams.

She scrambled up from the circle and searched for the source of the sound. A loud roar sent her backwards into the arms of someone behind her. She didn't know, or care, who.

Most of the people, and all except one elephant, ran from the sight of two lions attacking the elephant with Vendon and Xile hanging from its sides.

Rusty had a walking stick and her gatherboard. Being eaten alive was not her idea of the way either Goddess Amber, or Kafa, would want even those two men to die.

Dan and Marken ran past her with sharp sticks and hit the rope, making it fall off the elephant.

The elephant ran to join its friends.

Dan and Marken ran back to her.

She waited long enough to see one lion roar and place his face over Vendon's.

A loud crack ended his shrill cries.

Dan grabbed one arm, and Marken grabbed the other. They ran to join the rest of the group.

Not far away, the people had stopped and adjusted their gatherboards. They had lost nothing, other than the elephant's burden, in their mad dash across the Grass Sea.

"Are we still going the right way," Rusty asked Treny when she caught her breath.

Treny nodded. "There is a small lake over that way we sometimes hunt nearby. We can turn south and be back on the Tuttle path in a brisk walk."

Rusty glanced back down the trampled grass. The lions hadn't roared since they ran. Perhaps they would be content with two men to eat. She shuddered. "They shouldn't follow, I don't think."

Brix looked back along the trail. "Not likely. If everyone is breathing okay again, you better be going on. It's a long walk. Jasey and I'll stay behind with one or two men from Leana to be sure we are safe, and that Vendon and Xile don't escape."

"I wish you didn't have to risk your life," Rusty said.

He touched her shoulder and looked her in the eye. "I'd rather do so here, in my comfort zone. Take safety and health back to our lodges. We will catch up soon." Brix strode off with Jasey and two men, striding tall beside him.

Rusty's eyes misted over. They knew wild animals, and should be safe, and all four could move faster following their trail, than the children trotting on the long walk could. She would be as brave as them. Pulling her gatherboard tight on her shoulder, she turned to Treny. "Let's go."

Treny lifted her gatherboard back to her shoulder, and pulled Wit and Shara close to her. "We should reach Tuttle by nightfall."

"I can't imagine being like Corandra. She took off alone with her camel Ellie for several days while the children of Shells were sick." Rusty gripped the strap on her gatherboard until her knuckles turned white, and followed.

Treny's eyes closed. "Did she say why?"

Rusty shook her head. "We were leaving when she returned. Henry saw her, I don't think anyone else did. I hope she isn't alone out here somewhere."

"Hunters often go out alone," Dan said. "Maybe she should join the Shims hunters."

Rusty's face turned red. "She doesn't want to be a healer, a weaver, or a miner. Perhaps that is what she is meant to do."

He looked at her. "There are other positions no one has held for a gen or two. Perhaps she belongs in one of them."

Rusty's heart sunk. No one wanted to think of the forgotten skills in the villa. People who watched others, reported crimes, real or false; or those who watched for roamers from places known, or unknown. Those purposes were almost as scary as the roamers themselves. Or those lions devouring Vendon and Xile.

Shara tapped Rusty's hand.

Rusty stopped to look at the young girl.

"Will you tell me stories of my sister?"

What good stories could she tell? There had to be at least one good story. The girl would hear enough bad stories soon. Rusty took Shara's hand. "Corandra and Henry, my brother, were raised as twins. I remember those days. Everyone was so happy."

Shara's eyes gazed into her own with rapt attention.

I'll have to be careful to not tell her the scary stories, or all the arguments Corandra seemed to search for, and find easily. The story of Corandra and Henry and the talking plastic should be a safe one. When she finished, she swung arms with Shara. "Tell me a story about you, and your brother Wit."

Shara skipped along swinging Rusty's hand and told story after story. She wasn't at all like her sister. Their mother had always been a part of her life though. Perhaps if she hadn't left Corandra behind.

Treny glanced back at her daughter holding Rusty's hand. A shadow crossed her face. She beckoned, then turned back to lead the group.

"Treny, do you want Shara with you?" Rusty asked.

Shara swung her arm, a little more than necessary.

Treny stared ahead. "She's safer with you. I'll scare the snakes away." She swung her walking stick with far more vigor than necessary with the noisy crowd following them.

Rusty closed her eyes. Nothing she could do for Shara would be right in Treny's eyes. Right now, though, Shara wanted to know more about the older sister she had never met. Stories would be good for Treny to hear too.

Chapter 37

Leana's dogs loped ahead of Ambrena and Marken as they walked near the back of the line. She had seen to a few cuts and scrapes from those hurt when the lions attacked Vendon and Xile. Luckily, the elephants hadn't truly stampeded. No one had been seriously physically injured, other than the two men from Kees, of course.

The emotional trauma would have to be accessed later. Some would have nightmares, either of the death screams of Vendon and Xile, or the elephants running them down. She knew what her nightmares would be tonight, if she dared sleep at all.

People ahead of them walked at a speed which would allow the slowest to keep pace without worrying about anyone becoming lost. Elephants ranged behind, stopping to snack whenever they approached the people. They never strayed far, and trumpeted to scare away wild animals. Now, they were like watchdogs, protecting their acquired herd.

Marken walked beside her and listened to the stories as they floated back from the people in front of them.

Talking would speed the walk, and hide her fears. "What are you thinking?" Ambrena asked.

"Even with all these people I feel alone. Rusty ran to the front with Treny, as she should. Brix and Jasey are behind us somewhere. I feel I should have stayed with them." He grinned and waved his arm at the expanse of grass.

"They'll be fine. They've hunted lions." She didn't want to tell him they ate lion meat occasionally. He'd learn their customs, if Zella allowed him to stay.

"I'm selfish. I can't bear to see Vendon's face again." He stopped and turned to her.

Ambrena touched his hand. "His attitude? Or, because his face resembles Yall?" Marken would heal from his emotional pain, even if it took many seasons. Zella and Dover and could do it. If they had survived the illness.

"I don't know." He looked down at his trembling hands.

"Probably both. Don't feel bad. Zella will know where you belong." Ambrena grabbed one trembling hand and pulled him forward. "We have to catch up!"

He laughed and pulled away. They raced to catch the trailing walkers.

Falena walked nearby, like Ambrena, to be sure no one was too exhausted to continue the walk. As children tired, adults tried to carry them. They were too weary, and carried too heavy of gatherboards to carry children too.

Dusk crept across the land. The first signs of Tuttle appeared beyond the leaders. Smoke should have circled above the villa for evening meal fires. Dogs should have barked in greeting.

She raced forward with Marken at her side.

Other than chickens fluttering out of the way, Tuttle was empty.

Ambrena gasped and covered her mouth. They should be here, unless they had died, or gone to Shells for the Fall Trade.

Dan ran by her, and into the Nala's lodge. He came out again and grinned. "I think they went on to Shims. Everything is packed and gone. We can all stay here tonight. It's too late to travel any further."

Several children nodded against their mother's legs, and held on so they wouldn't fall down.

Dan hurried to build up a fire inside the villa treasury. They would huddle close together in these strange surroundings.

Ambrena had visited Tuttle. She felt as if she were like the people with her, on the outside, looking in. Many of Tuttle's secrets she didn't know. Dan knew most of them. Many, even he had been excluded from, because of his past.

"Dan where is?" was heard from several people as he built the fire. He found some food to add to what the Leana group had brought, pointed out the creek for water, meal utensils, and other necessities as the people helped prepare a camp inside the treasury.

A smile slipped through as the crowd bustled around inside. Not at all like the sickly, hushed silence, except for coughs, of the Shells' treasury only a little while before. As tired as the people were, they shared the tasks, and comforted the lame that didn't stay

behind as comfortable as they could inside the walls, safe from lions.

Cleanup of the evening meal began. Children and dogs snoozed out of the way. Brix, Jasey, and the other two men from Leana walked quietly into the treasury. A nod at the leaders was the closest to a comment on what had happened that afternoon. Jasey dropped two skinned rabbits by the fire for someone to rinse and place in a pan to simmer until morning.

No tales around the fire. All the old tales had been repeated on the walk, and new ones would be found in the coming days. Adults settled down to sleep, less easily than the children. They faced their fear of the unknown, in relative safety.

Ambrena, Rusty, and Falena walked outside with Dan for first watch.

"We've never kept watch before," Dan said. "It's strange."

"We'd probably be all right," Falena said. "If we had arrived sooner, we could have looked around so we'd know where lodges are, and how the land flows."

Dan sat in the moonlight, waiting. "I think they went on to Shims. It won't take us long to reach it tomorrow. It'll be good to see everyone again."

"I could ride one of the elephants," Rusty said. "Go on ahead, so they'll be waiting for us."

"I want to see my sister," Falena said. "She may need my help if Shells is as sick as you said."

"As long as we've been gone, is anyone still alive there? I hope the illness didn't spread," Ambrena said.

Dan leaned back against the lodge. "I don't like the idea of splitting up."

"Rusty, I think you may be right. Take your pack, and go try to meet Quan. If no one is there, can you stay awake long enough to come back?" Ambrena asked.

Rusty nodded. "I'll be fine. Question is, can I separate one elephant without disturbing the rest of the herd."

"You aren't walking alone at night," Dan said sharply.

"I'll go and see if any horses or camels were left. I doubt it though." Rusty stood up.

"I don't think she should go alone." Dan watched her go.

"I'll wake Brix and Jasey. They may go with her, the sooner the better to find Quan awake." Ambrena slipped inside the treasury.

Brix and Jasey slept near the entry, so Dan could wake them part of the way through the night.

She shook Brix's shoulder. "We need you," she whispered.

He rolled over and tapped Jasey.

They followed her outside.

Rusty returned. "No horses or camels in sight."

"Why do you need one tonight?" Brix asked.

"So Quan will know we are safe, and are coming in the morning." Rusty sat down beside them.

Jasey smiled and waved his arms.

"Take Jasey with you. He can call his camel. All the animals near here know him."

Rusty went into the treasury for her gatherboard. When she came back she said, "How many are coming to Shims tomorrow?"

Ambrena glanced to Falena, and back at Rusty. "I don't really want us going separate ways, now, or ever. I understand though. If Falena is okay with it, I think most of Leana should go on to Shims. She and I can go to Shells."

Falena nodded. "I'm not Leana's leader, so I can't make that decision for the people. I think you are right. Most of Leana will go to Shims. Treny, Shara, and Wit should come with us."

Rusty nodded and left with Jasey.

Ambrena closed her eyes. One more sister friend gone from her side. The thought of feeling abandoned with so many people nearby brought a smile to her lips. She wasn't really alone. Rusty would be back. Corandra, they would see in the morning at Shells, if she hadn't run off again.

Deep inside, her heart trembled. If she returned to Shells without Rusty, and a cure for the illness, would Zella and Tanna turn away from her? A sob travelled upward trying to fight its way out.

A hand on her shoulder turned her gaze outward, rather than inward.

Marken sat beside her, gazing deep into her eyes.

Of course, he was in even more trouble than she was. Marken could not go back to his villa, had lost the woman who asked for him, and would not be able to return to that villa either.

He reached for her hand.

"Rusty is the closest to a sister I have, I don't want her to leave."

"Would you normally fear her traveling to another villa?"

Ambrena tried to laugh. It came out like a wild animal call. "No. She wouldn't. Rusty hardly ever travelled. I was always the one who did."

Marken touched her hand gently.

A tingle went up her spine.

"I'm going to stay with you. I know you and Rusty well. I want to meet Zella whom you have spoken with such regard for. When you show her the artifact, and tell her what you found, I am sure she will know what it is."

His words cheered her up.

"Come on, you need your sleep. Even if we leave after the rest of the group." Marken led her back inside the treasury to her gatherboard.

She tried to relax and doze off. Marken had stayed nearby, as uncomfortable around all the strangers as she was. Knowing he was there, wouldn't replace Rusty, even if it was comforting.

Chapter 38

Grass waved in the slight breeze.

Corandra gazed around her. Everywhere she looked, different plants grew, ones she didn't recognize. Off in the distance were strange tall trees, with arms that waved in a circle in the breeze. Not at all like anything she had seen before.

Jorn walked beside her. "You see them, don't you?"

"What are they?"

"Lost in the ages of the ancestors, they had a longer name. Now, they are called mills." He stopped to catch his breath.

"You could have rode Ellie. Were the strange trees named after the villa?" Corandra said.

Jorn laughed. "Never been on the back of a living animal, and I have no intention of doing so now. As for Mills, I think the villa was named after the artifacts."

Corandra shaded her eyes from the glaring sun to peer at the non-trees. They soared over the varying types of grasses, different from any of the Grass Sea she knew. Their arms waved in a circle, as if honoring a grass Goddess. "What purpose do they serve?"

More laughter as Jorn walked forward. "You have been in Shells too long. Sometimes, it's nice to have pretty things that are nice to look at. I don't know the truth of how they work, or what they do. I do know; they won't share the secret with anyone."

Ellie nickered.

"It's a remainder gift of the ancients?" Corandra sneezed.

"I think so. We should meet Gerry soon. He usually watches this field."

Corandra pushed Ellie on ahead. Now that she knew where to go, there was no stopping her.

"Don't race ahead!" Jorn shouted.

She raced on anyway. The old man should have ridden with one of them, and they would have reached Mills, and maybe back to Shims by now. They had to find Henry, Rusty, and Ambrena. The key to what caused their sponsor's gen's violence should stop what was happening now. One way to find out.

Even though Ellie raced as fast as Corandra would let her go, it seemed the strange trees stayed the same distance away. Almost out of breath herself, she reached the ground beneath one.

Like the villa of Shims, the wooden tree stood on a platform of rock and wood. As big around as a lodge, with a covered walkway winding up the side. It narrowed near the top. The wooden arms arched in a circle on the slightest breeze. Ropes dangled from the tall wooden sides. A horse lodge nearby was empty.

Corandra gulped. Something about it made her stomach feel strange. A deep, empty, fluttery strange. She slid off of Ellie and walked to the giant lodge on a pedestal. Its arms flailed toward her. She ran to the walkway and followed the lodge up its side.

Climbing into a lodge way above the ground didn't appeal to her sense of normalcy. Even though there was a wall beside her, she felt as if she could fall and land on the ground. Higher and higher, she climbed until she reached an entry covered by wood.

She tried to put her hand between the wall and wood on the right side. It wouldn't budge. She tried the left. No movement. Frustrated, she pushed in front of her with both hands flat on the wooden panels. The wood flew away, and banged against the wall on her left.

Sunlight flooded in and struck a head in a hole on a dirt floor at her feet. The head turned her way. Familiar features beamed her direction. She had known them as long as she could remember.

Gasping, she clutched her chest. "Henry?"

A man lifted up out of the hole. The sun showed his face and shoulders a little more clearly. "Na. Who you?"

Corandra stepped back. Memories flooded through her. Henry had always protected her. He wasn't here now, and this person spoke different. As if he didn't know her words. She could run back to Jorn. He'd laugh. The rickety walkway wouldn't be easy to run down anyway. Better to keep this man in her sight. She'd run away too often. Proof that she could complete what she started would win her a place in Shells.

"Who are you?" Corandra asked. She stood tall and let the sun stretch her elongated shadow across the man before her.

He stretched back and laughed. "My place. Who you?"

Of course, he was right. Jorn would be here soon and fix it all, if she didn't now. "Jorn said Gerry would be nearby, is that you?"

He nodded and laughed. "Tell me."

"About me?"

Gerry pointed from her to the floor. At least speaking was easy. Jorn would find her and then she could ask the questions she should have already asked him. Her story's starting spot could be anywhere. What would Gerry need to know?

She glanced at his eyes. So like the eyes of Henry, she almost forgot this was a man, not the boy she grew up with. "Henry and I grew up together. We never knew our past. We want to know now where our sponsors came from. Can you tell me about your villa?"

"Corandra, where are you?" Ida called from down below.

She stood up, walked out the entry, and glanced down at the ground. It was so far away. Higher than any tree she had ever climbed. Her head swirled, and she sank down on her knees.

Rough arms held her away from the walkway so she wouldn't fall.

"Thanks," she whispered.

Brael was soon beside her. "I know it won't do any good to remind you not to run off on your own. We'll have you on the ground soon."

"I'll carry." Gerry picked her up in his arms, carried her down the walkway, and placed her gently on the ground in the shade.

She opened her eyes.

He stared at her.

"Never been that high before."

"No trees tall here."

Jorn strode up and stopped at the sight of her and Gerry. "Figured as much. Gerry, I need to talk to you alone."

Gerry walked into the tall grass with Jorn.

"He's really angry, isn't he?" Corandra touched her forehead. It felt warm, or maybe it was the heat from the sun.

Ida closed her eyes. "I think he knew what you would do. Responsibility doesn't come easy for you."

"I'm being responsible! I have to find the answers to fix whatever is wrong in our community!" She wanted to stomp her feet, and couldn't while on the ground.

Ida handed her a water gourd. "Is running the risk of being attacked by a lion responsible?"

She drank and then replied, "I guess not. I want to complete what I start before I forget it."

Ida nodded. "Sometimes one person's idea of a responsible way to act can seem the lazy, or wrong, way to another. Guess that's how you often feel?"

"Yeah. Guess so."

Ellie snorted and walked over to sniff her.

Corandra reached up to hug the camel's nose. Her best friend, she meant almost as much as Henry. Even if she did push him aside. His laughter and his eyes had always been part of her life. No matter how angry everyone else was; he had always been there to listen to how she felt, and fix things when she broke them. She would fix the past for him, for all he had done for her.

Jorn returned with Gerry close behind.

Gerry hurried up the walkway into the mill. The sun glinted on his hair. He hurried into the entry.

"I wish he had stayed. I want to know what it is for," Corandra said.

Jorn grunted. "You've a one track mind. He'll be back. We have a long way to go before dark." He shoved a fur wrapped packet back into her gatherboard and glared at Corandra.

A bump from high in the strange lodge startled them, and they all looked up.

Ida and Brael glanced at each other, at Jorn, and then back at Corandra.

Gerry ran back down the walkway carrying a long thin tube. "One I can share." He handed it to Jorn.

Jorn held it up to his eye. He grunted and tucked it into his gatherboard. "Guess we better be going."

He turned to walk back along the path they had made.

Gerry had answers she needed. Henry was missing. Which was more important?

"Wait." Gerry grabbed Jorn's arm. "I go with you."

"No."

"Yes." Gerry ran down a path beside the mill.

"I wish he wouldn't alert his mother," Jorn said.

"He may not," Ida said. "We will wait."

Corandra rubbed Ellie's nose. Her head still spun if she moved too fast.

Gerry returned with a gatherboard, another male, and a horse. The unknown male went up the walkway and into the mill.

"Go now," Gerry said.

The horse he rode neighed at Ellie and the other two camels.

"On to Tuttle then. Falena will expect us." Jorn glared at Gerry and at Corandra. "No running off alone you two."

Gerry laughed. "Diedre wouldn't like. Stories though."

Corandra rode beside Gerry.

"Tell me about the mills, what do you use them for?"

"Water for food. Other reasons, sometimes."

"You two will be lost if you don't allow me to lead." Jorn panted from hobbling so fast.

Corandra dropped back beside Ida.

Ida glanced at her. "Gerry looks like Henry, doesn't he?"

She nodded. "I thought he was."

"His sponsor's sister's child, I think. We'll ask Jorn later."

Jorn had been in a hurry to leave Mills. Too much of a hurry. He had to be hiding something from her.

"We stop here for the night," Jorn said. "By morning, I should be able to check on the young men we left with the boats."

Corandra yawned. She'd have to wake early and go out on her own with Ellie. Jorn was too obnoxious to be around. Warm and drowsy, she ignored Ida and Jorn sitting by the fire. A warm blanket pulled over her invited sleep.

Chirping birds woke her in the morning.

Jorn sat beside the lake and watched the sleepers.

Corandra sat up. No way to leave on her own now. It'd be fun to be with them when she introduced Gerry to the Pit Miners anyway. He looked so much like Henry; everyone would think he was Henry.

"We better be going soon," Jorn said. "We have to try to make the one and half day trip in one day, if we can."

"Sure you don't want to ride?" Brael said.

"Never have, never will." Jorn strode off into the grass leaving the others scrambling to catch up.

Corandra on Ellie, and Gerry, on his horse rode behind Brael and Ida. He didn't say a word to her, and watched ahead. Corandra and Ellie drifted along in the Grass Sea. Much like before, when they had gone off together, she longed for solitude. Being alone too long wouldn't be good. She didn't dare stray too far.

Off to the south, a dark spot peeked over the grass.

Ellie slowed down. When Gerry rode ahead to talk to Jorn, she turned Ellie off to figure out what that dark spot in the distance was. The dark spot grew as they approached.

Chapter 39

Rusty and Jasey hurried down the moonlit trail that she and Ambrena had confidentially ridden to Shims so many days before. Then, there had been hope in finding a cure for the illness that besieged Shells. Now, she wondered what she would find in Shims.

The trail ended in front of the Shims' lodges. People shaped forms littered the ground.

A chill swept through Rusty. It would soon be too cold for people to sleep outside. Where had all these people come from? Had Shims already been attacked?

Jasey gripped her hand.

Rusty ran to the first person. She almost laughed when a snore woke the puppy hiding under Nala's arm. Two girls slept next to her.

Quan would be near the fire, or in his lodge. She picked her way to the fire pit. A shivering wind made the wide, low burning fire feel remarkably warm on her bare arms. At last, she stumbled her way past all the sleeping people, and to Quan's hunched figure. She sat down close to him, her hands held out for warmth. "Ambrena and I are back, we bring the villa of Leana with us to help. Dan found us at the lake near their villa."

Quan nodded. "That is good. We will talk with Wenda in the morning. For now, let Jasey go to her."

Jasey nodded and scurried off to his lodge.

Rusty waited.

"You left them," Quan said.

"The children could walk no further. They made it to Tuttle."

"Tomorrow, will be soon enough to plan. Sleep now."

Rusty stood up and turned to find an empty place to sleep. Before she could go, she had to ask one last question. "How are Henry and Corandra?"

Quan shook his head and closed his eyes.

New worries would make her heart ache all night. She had to find Wenda now. Wenda would answer.

At Wenda's entry, she knocked. "May I come in?"

"Of course," Wenda said.

Rusty stepped in.

Wenda's tears glistened in the firelight as she held her son. "I am so thankful you brought him safely back to Shims."

"I hope Corandra and Henry stayed in Shells. They did, didn't they?"

Wenda hugged Jasey tighter. She shook her head. "Corandra is with Ida and Brael. Aren't they with you?"

Rusty shook her head. "Henry is safe?"

Jasey slid off Wenda's lap.

"No." Wenda's lip quivered. "He was attacked. We don't know where he is. We planned to search for them tomorrow."

Rusty slid down to the floor. Thoughts raced through her mind. Henry was her only relative. Now he was gone. Ambrena would probably go to Shells and tell them everything, and she'd have to face his death all alone.

Wenda grabbed her to keep her from falling into the fire. "Rusty, we will find him. I know we will. Did you come alone?"

Jasey grabbed his mother's hands, and made motions in the air, and drew something in a pit of ashes beside the fire.

Rusty was too tired and upset to care. She rolled over and faced the wall, and let the pain overtake her.

Wenda touched her arm. "Here, drink some tea. We need you today."

"Is it morning?"

Wenda nodded. "Jasey left to watch for your friends. Quan will come, and we will find Henry."

Rusty struggled to sit up. "Kees and Tree Burb are both a danger to us."

Wenda handed her some dried meat to eat. "Tell me what you know."

She told her everything Marken had said about both Kees and Tree Burb. "Do you know anything about them?"

"Very little. From what we've seen, Tree Burb has no animals. They do hunt, and they may be one of the groups we have seen on the river. I don't know. As long as they don't bother us, we've never bothered, or spoken, to them." Wenda gazed at the fire.

"Never to learn anything they might remember that our villas have forgotten?" Rusty leaned forward.

"Selfish, isn't it? We should have. A few hunters have met them, and though no words were spoken, a brandishing of spears always happens. A show of force. Not enough trust to meet, and try to speak."

Jasey ran into the lodge, gesturing frantically.

Wenda's face paled. She jumped up and ran out screaming orders to the noisy early morning crowd.

Jasey raced by on his camel.

Children ran from the river to the treasury. Adults hurried to grab spears and stood around the villa's edges. Before long, elephants trumpeted as they walked into the villa of Shims. They pushed their way past the screaming Pit Miners, straight for the river, and a drink.

Rusty jumped up and tripped over her gatherboard. A fur rolled out. The one Dover had given her. She picked it up and turned it around in her hand. Then, she hurried out to find Ambrena.

The people from Leana seemed almost more familiar to Rusty than the Pit Miners. Maybe because she mostly saw the non-Shells Pit Miners during festivals, and not every day. Ambrena and Marken were nowhere in sight.

Rusty watched and waited on Ambrena to arrive. When she saw no sign of her, she turned away. A choice had to be made. Go to Tree Burb and rescue her brother, or to Kees to be sure that neither Tree Burb, nor their own villas, would be attacked again.

She returned to the fire in Wenda's lodge. Her fingers sifted the ash in the ash pit. It filtered between them to the ground.

The ash gave Jasey an opportunity to communicate with his mother, even if no one else understood it. Or, perhaps some did.

Rusty scattered the ashes in Jasey's circle. Somehow, touching the ashes, and sifting them through her fingers, comforted her. Alone away from everyone she had known, the hole in her heart for her missing brother, Ambrena, Corandra, and Glenna ached. She didn't dare think of Zande. His memory flittered on the edge, and she pushed it away. Today she could not dwell in a future that wouldn't happen.

Wenda, Quan, Lavina, Brix, and the leader of Leana joined her.

"I think we should go straight to Tree Burb," Wenda said.

Brix shook his head. "No. I have the directions to Kees from Marken. We have to show the people of Tree Burb that the people who attacked them will no longer do so."

"Tree Burb could attack those we leave behind while we are gone," Wenda said.

"Perhaps. From what Marken, Vendon, Xile, and Yall told us, I don't think so. I also don't think Kees is crowded. He said most of the fighters were to the south, stranded by the storm they survived. We owe it to them, to ourselves, and to Tree Burb, to verify the level of danger Kees currently is to all of us."

Leana's leader requested the talk circle. "You think it's best to go to Kees first?"

Brix nodded.

She glanced at Rusty. "Many of my people are not ready to fight. They have had little training other than in hunting. If you are correct, many could stay behind to guard this villa while the better hunters could go to Kees." She handed the talk circle over to Wenda.

"Perhaps. We could send a few scouts in the direction of Tree Burb. Ultimately, it is up to Rusty."

Brix requested the talk circle. "I do not know where Tree Burb is. Marken promised to come tomorrow, to lead a group there. I do not know if we can reach Kees and return in one day. I do know a small group of hunters can move more swiftly than the large group we would need if we do not verify Kees position first."

Leana's leader nodded. "You trust Marken?"

Rusty glanced up. "He will be true to his word. Unless Ambrena begs him to stay in Shells."

Brix, Quan, Wenda, and Leana's leader smiled, and looked away from the firelight.

Brix took the talk circle. "Quan, perhaps, we should send one of Brael's assistants to check on Ambrena and Shells if they do not return. I wouldn't blame Marken if he did stay with Ambrena."

Wenda gasped and handed the talk circle to Quan.

"Jasey has been sent to bring Marken and Ambrena. Dover and Zella must know Henry is safe. Wenda, you must quickly train the Leana group. Rusty must lead them tomorrow." He handed the talk circle to Lavina.

Lavina gulped as she grasped it. "Our scouts have seen more horses that do not belong to any of our villas. Webbel has been searched. We must go." She glanced at Quan and handed the talk circle to Rusty.

Rusty looked to Wenda.

"Take it. What do you intend to do?" Wenda leaned toward her.

A tiny whimper escaped as Rusty reached for the talk circle. She had never held one at a meeting. There had been no need for one before she left Shells in her skill as dig leader. Her left hand took the talk circle and knocked the fur out of her right hand. A tiny wooden charm fell out into the ash pit. One she had never seen.

She picked it up, and held it toward the fire. It had six sharp points, and a hole in the center to be strung on a necklace. "What is it?"

Quan held out his hand and took it. He waved at Rusty.

She blushed. Of course, she held the talk circle. Her hand wavered as she passed the circle to him.

He lifted the charm, and tilted it in the light. "I cannot say. Dover gave you this?"

She nodded.

"We will train now. Rusty will lead us tomorrow. Any opposed?"

No one motioned for the talk circle.

Chapter 40

Ambrena slept restlessly, tossing and turning. Unsure, and worried about the following day. Taking Falena to a sister who didn't know she existed. And Marken to the only mother she remembered. Zella and Tanna's reaction would show her if they wanted her to come back to Shells, or this trip had been their first effort to turn her away from the one villa she remembered.

At some point, Marken's hand reached for hers, and her tossing and turning stilled. At least, if Tanna sent her away for good, she wouldn't have to travel the Grass Sea alone. They could both search for a new villa, together. Maybe somewhere, far away, they would find another person who wanted to be a part of their life, whether in the same villa, or a nearby one.

Morning, and the flurry of activity that accompanied it, woke Ambrena. She was mostly alone inside the treasury. Several small children ran, tripped, and fell over the heaps of blankets and gatherboards scattered around. At least Leana had not left her behind. The blanket fell off her shoulders, and she shivered. Winter was coming. They could not travel alone, or only as two. Maybe Tanna would allow them to stay until spring, perhaps in Trapper's old lodge.

Falena walked into the treasury. "Hi Ambrena. Didn't want to wake you too soon. Figured we'd wait until everyone else left for the villa they are going to today. It'd be too confusing otherwise." She sat down beside Ambrena and handed her some tea.

Ambrena took it and sipped carefully. The temperature was perfect for drinking.

"I figured you could tell me stories about my sister. I've already said my goodbyes to family and friends."

Ambrena's eyes met Falena's over the cup, "Is your son going with us?"

Falena shook her head. "He's a great hunter. One of the best. He felt he needed to go and save the villas. Plus, he said, if the illness spreads, he'd be safe from it."

Ambrena nodded. Smart choice. They could easily have carried the illness to everyone they had met in their travels. Maybe they

had, and that was why Tuttle had joined Shims. Dan hadn't said anything, though he may not know.

Soon, Brix led the main group of Leana south to Shims.

Ambrena shouldered her gatherboard and started the walk to Shells with a heavy heart.

Marken walked beside her, not speaking.

Falena walked behind her with Treny, Shara, and Wit by her side.

If their thoughts were half as scared as hers, and she knew they had to be, this short journey would feel as if it stretched into next season.

She wanted to cheer everyone up. After all, Falena would be facing a sister she had never met. Marken a potential villa to join, if they accepted him. Treny would be facing the ghost of her past in Zella and Tanna's face. Ambrena trudged along. Her voice cracked when she tried to speak. "Marken, tell us a river story."

The sound of hoofs racing hurried them off the path.

Jasey pulled to a stop beside them. He waved his arms, and pulled at Ambrena.

"We need to go back?"

He nodded. His camel danced under his feet.

"I am sorry Falena, I must go. I want to see Zella too."

Falena touched her arm. "We'll all go. No one should travel alone."

It didn't take long to return to Tuttle. With Jasey unable to tell them anything, what awaited them remained an unknown cold knot deep in her stomach. Anything could have happened in Shims overnight.

At almost midday, they reached Tuttle again. Another set of hooves thundered in their direction. Ida and Brael raced into the clearing and stopped before them.

"Are you alone?" Ida asked.

"Just us," Ambrena said. "We'd planned to go to Shells until Jasey came for us."

"Gerry and Jorn will catch up soon, and we'll walk with you," Brael said.

Shara and Wit played and sang as they waited. Ida, Brael, and Jasey waited quietly. Almost invisible signs passed between them.

A large horse walked into the clearing through the tall grass. On its back rode a man so like Henry, Ambrena gasped.

He smiled as he looked down at her. "Hi."

A gaunt man with a cane hobbled beside him.

"Hi. It's good to see Jorn." Ambrena's voice wavered. "We better go. I've no idea why Jasey came back for us."

Shara reached for her hand and walked between her and Marken.

Gerry rode silently behind them, with Jorn hobbling at his side.

Once they reached Shims the rest of the day rushed by in preparations. No one knew what to expect. Wenda would keep a group to watch Shims and Shells, while Leana would go with Rusty and Ambrena.

Shims was so crowded with people, that Marken and Ambrena walked down to the riverside after the evening meal to be near the horses. "We'll ride tomorrow," he said.

She nodded and kicked her heels in the water. It was almost peaceful from the villa's rumble of voices behind them, and moving water in front of them.

A branch shifted and Gerry walked up to them. "Brena, artifacts." He held out his hand.

With no idea what he wanted, she stared at him.

Gerry drew two rectangles in the dirt. "Artifacts. Took mine, and yours."

"One was yours?" How could one of them be his?

He nodded. "Know how to make it work past speaking."

Ambrena clutched Marken's hand. "You watched us!"

He nodded. "Always watch Kees. Fraid of their leaders. Some not so bad." Gerry glanced at Marken. His hand still out, he waited.

"I don't have them with me. They are in Wenda's lodge."

"After tomorrow then?"

To find out how the box worked could answer so many questions. She nodded. He'd have to show her, since he had so much trouble speaking.

It was a long night of stars blinking and dogs howling as children cried and clung to mothers and sponsors who would leave soon.

Ambrena joined Rusty and the group gathered around the fire as the sun's rays graced the horizon.

"Rusty, take this, and look through it as you go," Jorn handed her a long thin tube. "I won't be going with you. I'll stay in Shims with Quan."

He hobbled off to Quan's lodge. No fight left in him, though he could tell others how, and what needed to be done, to save the community he had abandoned so long ago.

Ambrena clasped her spear. She might not be able to stab anyone, even with his lessons last night. She'd try, to keep him from having to fight to save the children here.

Even with all the preparations the day before, it was nearly midday before they left Shims. Ambrena, Marken, and Rusty rode elephants. Those on horses followed behind. Many from Leana walked together behind all the animals. It would be a long walk.

Mid-afternoon, and the late fall sunshine slanted long along the tops of the grass. Rusty had said she would call camp soon. The lead elephant stopped and Rusty held the long tube up to her eye. Her hands shook as she dropped it to her lap.

"I see something I don't recognize."

"What is it?" Ambrena asked.

Rusty held a finger to her lips. "Slip off, all of you. We can fight better on the ground."

Once on the ground she gathered her closest advisors together. "Brix? What can we do?"

He held his spear at the ready. "What did you see?"

"Lots of spears sticking up in the grass."

Marken squeezed Ambrena's hand and turned to face the direction they had been riding.

An elephant trumpeted.

Spears flew at them.

Rusty grabbed Ambrena.

Marken, and those from Leana with spears, ran ahead.

Screams rent the air as the attack began.

Ambrena grabbed her spear and followed Marken.

He was on the ground with his head over the face of someone.

She touched his shoulder as screams echoed around them.

He glanced up with tears in his eyes.

On the ground lay Henry's body with Marken's spear pinning him down. Blood pooled around the spear point in his shoulder.

"I saw the spear, and movement. I didn't know," Marken said.

Ambrena gulped, pushed him aside, and reached for Henry's head to see the damage done.

"Keep Rusty away, and stop this battle! It's a mistake!" Ambrena turned back to Henry.

Marken mumbled something, and stumbled away.

Chapter 41

A dark peak towered over a sloping base. All around the base, bits of the same strange stone lay scattered in unusual broken lines throughout the grass.

Corandra steered Ellie through the maze of lines. In places, the rock had broken down to mere pebbles. She slid off and left Ellie to nibble the grass. Safe from hunters, with plenty of food available; rodents, snakes, spiders, and small reptiles would find an area like this an excellent place to live.

Sure enough, snakes and lizards slithered off the rocks, into the grass, and away from her feet. A few birds circled high above the peak. Sprigs of grass sprung up along its sides. Wild chickens of all types fluttered, protecting their nests from her exploring feet. From a distance, the dark mound had appeared over the top of the grass. Up close, she realized it was at least six adults high.

She scrambled up the sides. Rocks slipped and slid, disturbed by her weight. On top, many were grey. The sections revealed underneath the grass and dirt were darker. It might be dirt blown inside the rocks in the wind. At the top, a depression, like a cooking bowl stretched the length of her arm.

Corandra reached and felt the sides and bottom of the bowl shape. Smoothed by rain and wind, it felt safe enough. She crawled into it, and sat, staring into space. From this vantage point, she tried to imagine what the broken lines of stones must have meant to the ancestors. Most roamed from north to south, though a few filtered east to west. The longer she looked at it, the colder she felt. She shivered, realizing this must have been an important place for the ancestors. What it meant she didn't know.

Her foot moved and dislodged a stone, uncovering a hole. The sun's rays illuminated the hole. Corandra gasped. Something was there. A small box had been hidden inside the stone bowl. Her foot touched it. Already, she had nearly destroyed her community by opening one box dug out of the ground. If she opened this box, something bad could happen again.

She took a deep breath and reached for the box. Almost as big as a large cooking pot. If she opened it here, it would hurt only her. Far smaller than the red box she had opened, this one was yellow.

Something about the color of yellow, and the shattered landscape brought back an elusive memory. Zella had said something long ago, when she and Henry were toddlers. It was elusive now, rather like a spider's web, where she could almost hear a word or two, though their specific connections were lost in memory.

Carrying the box, she scrambled back down to Ellie. Sliding down was more painful than crawling up. Rocks scraped her arms and legs. Fallen rocks littered the side of whatever this was. Many other people and animals had climbed here before, and dislodged the stones.

She searched through the stones for a specific type of rock. If she could find them, she could go back to the top and draw the lines she had seen. Perhaps they would mean something to Zella.

A wild chicken above her fluttered to her nest.

Corandra's scrambling must have loosened a support.

An egg slipped out and bounced twice before splattering above her head.

She groaned. Egg yellows would work better than nothing. She ran to Ellie and pulled a cooking cover out of her gatherboard. Egg yellow, and cloth in hand, she pulled herself back to the top of the mound. Once there, she focused on drawing with a twig as best she could the lines of stone. It wasn't perfect, and the sun wouldn't dry it as fast as in the summer.

While she waited, she picked up the fur Jorn had tossed on top of her gatherboard. Dover had given it to her. In the rush and flurry, it had been forgotten, shoved well below the food in her pack. She held it close, afraid to open it. Had he given her a gift she could use now? Or, had he given her the black rock that meant he wanted her to find a new, permanent villa?

She didn't dare let Ida, Brael, or Henry, see what he had determined. Now she was alone. Prayer to the Goddesses wouldn't help. The decision had already been made. She coughed. Her throat felt a little raw. There had been a lot wind in the Grass Sea. Zella would know if this cough was something to worry about.

The packet slid to her lap and opened. Her fingers reached for the string that slid out. Her heart beat faster. The string slid out of the packet to reveal three charms. One shell, one spear, and one shaped like Ellie.

The clouds around her couldn't answer her questions. Adulthood ceremony wouldn't be until spring. Usually, the villa and skill designation were added then. So, was the spear to symbolize her belonging to, or moving to Webbel? Or did they expect her to be a hunter with Henry? And a charm made like Ellie? Did they want her to replace gen three Erin and lead the herds? It made no sense.

A tear dribbled her cheek and landed on the egg painting. It was dry. She'd have to hurry. Slipping and sliding down the hill was easier now, even though she carried the pieces of fur wrapped against her heart. She Placed the painted cooking cover, and the box in her gatherboard before she hurried back to Ellie. Returning to Zella now was of utmost importance. Searching for those she had been riding with didn't matter, as they were moving slowly anyway.

Once out of the broken line of rocks, she steered Ellie in the direction she believed Shells would be. If she were right, she'd be there before dark. If she were wrong, she'd be lost in the Grass Sea.

Chapter 42

The fire burned in Wenda's lodge. Henry lay on the ground wrapped in blankets and furs. Rusty rubbed the fur, not wanting to waken him. Ambrena had said he needed rest. A tear slipped down her cheek.

His hand reached for hers. "The elephants. I was leading Tree Burb. We thought the elephants meant it was Kees attacking again."

She nodded. The story had been repeated. Everyone knew now that the two groups had attacked each other, both thinking the other group was attacking them. The ancestor's tales said battles had often started that way.

"Rest. Ambrena said you'll be fine."

His eyes closed. "Forgive me."

"You stayed with them."

"They needed help." Henry's hand clasped the fur. "They, and we, need protection. I have to lead them to find who attacked them."

Rusty clasped his hand. "I'm going to lead the Leana villa in the morning. We will find Kees. Marken said they aren't all bad. Be better before I come back." As long as he didn't develop a fever he should be fine, though the spear had damaged his shoulder. There was no way to know at this point if it would lead to permanent damage.

His eyes closed. Water drops formed on his forehead.

She touched it. Hopefully, he was too close to the fire. Brix could move him, when he returned.

Fear of the future hung in the air. Several people from Tree Burb had been wounded and would stay in Shims until they could safely return to their own community. A few from Leana had been injured too. Thankfully, no one had died. The Goddesses had spared them that horror.

Jasey returned and played in the ash pit, drawing symbols she didn't recognize. If Henry survived, she'd come back, and learn them. They might be valuable. Like Zella's letter drawings once meant something.

One of them looked vaguely familiar. She stood over him and stared. It was a picture of the items on the table in the tiny lodge at the pit. Jasey had remembered. She squinted at the drawing. "Can you leave it till we return?"

He nodded, adding lines and more detail.

"He can sketch it on bark, if you want," Wenda said.

"Zella may need it to help us," Rusty said.

The small pile of bark now made sense.

Jasey sorted through it. He took a twig and placed it in the fire enough to char the edges. When he drew on a plain piece, it left marks. Before long, he had to re-char the end. It took several tries before he completed the drawing and placed it in her hands.

She held the drawing up into the light. A good image of what they had seen. "Do you remember the drawings it showed?"

He nodded slowly. On another bark, he charred what he could remember and held it up to her.

Rusty jumped for joy. "Would you take these to Zella now?"

Jasey frowned and pointed at her.

"I know you want to go. We will have so many with us. You can help this way."

Sad eyes pouting, he looked away and picked up his huntboard.

"Wenda, Brix, come outside," Ida shouted.

Hopefully Corandra had arrived. Rusty stepped outside.

A man on horseback stared at her.

Something about his face was familiar. The sun peeked out from behind a cloud and covered his face. He looked so much like Henry, she gasped.

Ida laughed. "Yes Rusty, Gerry is your sponsor's sister's son. We had to be sure Corandra's eyes didn't deceive her."

Rusty had heard mention of Gerry after they returned to Shims. She hadn't seen him. His resemblance to Henry was remarkable.

"Is Corandra with you?" Rusty glanced back at Ida.

"Isn't she here?" Ida glanced around the crowd of Pit Miners and Leana Maze.

A yell turned their attention to the pathway. Marken, Ambrena, and Treny walked into the crowded clearing.

Ambrena hurried up to her. "How is Henry?"

"He said a few words." Rusty hugged her.

Another hunting scout ran up to Wenda. "Tree Burb are back safe. They have an interesting place there. No sign of trouble. Or animals, between there and here. Almost too quiet."

"We will go in the morning," Wenda said. "We need new spear tips, and food prepared."

In the morning, people gathered in the order they had discussed the night before. With so many here, they could easily reach Kees and leave Shims protected.

Traveling had never been Rusty's idea of a good way to spend a day. Now, it was even less so. Every passing day might endanger Henry, if he was even still alive. A fever could kill him in days. She couldn't be there to hold his hand if she went to Kees. Her brother, or her villa. That was the choice.

Meeting Gerry hadn't changed her opinion. He wasn't Henry. Mannerisms, speech, and even thought processes were so different. Gerry was hiding something. What, she didn't know.

Corandra was still missing.

Gerry spoke fondly of meeting her, and then she disappeared. He said he tried to follow, and Jorn told him not to.

If he really cared, he would have followed her anyway and brought her back to Shims. All their troubles started with sending Corandra off on her own, and that red box.

Rusty closed her mouth, and her mind to the beauty of midday in the open Grass Sea. She wanted to live in Shells, work in Shelpit, live with Glenna, and have Henry nearby. If only Zande had lived. So many if only's. Had any gen ever lived in peace?

"Wenda, has anyone heard if anybody else died in Shells?"

"I haven't heard of any," Wenda said. "However, Quan and I haven't had much opportunity to talk about Shells. I am sure they are fine there. He has sent runners, and hasn't recounted any of their conversations to me."

"I hope Tanna, Zella, Dover, Robin and everyone else there are recovering from the illness. I want a lodge to go back to. If they'll have me." The tall grass before them stretched out endlessly, broken by tiny batches of shrub peeking over the tops in places.

Wenda didn't respond. Her lack of words meant more than empty, pleasing words, would mean.

The more she thought about it, the more she wanted to never dig again. What would Zella say when she said that? Would she be able to find someone else to train to search for a dig place? There might not even be any artifacts left. From what Marken had said, they'd have to watch out for the villas down the river, where Kees other members had been stranded. The other villas along the river might become dangerous if the fighting survivors joined them.

Somehow, she and Henry would find a place, if he survived. Perhaps, he might even consider living with the strange people of Tree Burb. After all, he had stayed with them to protect them.

Chapter 43

Shara grabbed Ambrena's hand. She chatted and pointed at birds. "I wish we could fly like them. We'd be able to see my sister sooner!"

Falena laughed, strained as it was. "Now, don't be too excited. Corandra might be at Shims."

Shara danced around in a circle and shouted, "Well if she is, we'll fly right back there and find her!" She ran off down the path.

Marken glanced at Ambrena. "It goes clear to Shells, right?"

Ambrena almost nodded. "No, there is a break to Klapit. No one goes there now. Though Rusty was sent there to check it before we left."

They needn't have worried. Shara raced back down the path, grabbed Ambrena's hand, and pulled her as fast as she could.

Marken laughed, grabbed Shara's hand gently, and caused her to let go of Ambrena. "We can't run as fast you can. Slow down, or dance ahead of us."

Shara laughed. She stayed ahead, dancing, running forward, and back.

Near the Klapit trail, howling monkeys threw nuts and shells at Shara.

Back to their sides she raced, hands over her head to protect it. "What are they?"

"The monkeys shouldn't hurt you. They'll let us pass, and go on about their day. Stay quiet, and they'll stop throwing things." Ambrena reached her hand to the startled child.

Shara looked up into her eyes with the same admiration that Pamma used to give her, not so long ago. Ambrena's heart lurched. She longed to hug Shara and comfort her, as a mother would a scared child.

Treny made no move to call her daughter to her. Of course, she was busy comforting Wit, who had screamed when a nut hit his head.

Ambrena's eyes closed. She wanted a daughter of her own. She had helped Tanna with the birth of three children. The birth process scared her, perhaps because she knew it could result in death.

Lasting childhood laughter would make it all worthwhile. As long as they lived, and didn't die as Zande had.

How Treny had ever left Corandra behind had always been beyond her understanding. Was she now abandoning her second daughter, because of Shara's interest in the sister she had never known? Ambrena shook her head and lowered her eyes. She couldn't look at Treny to guess what she was really thinking.

A root nearly tripped her, although she was looking at the ground.

Marken grabbed her, to keep her from falling. "You okay?"

Ambrena nodded. "I hope everyone is okay in Shells. I feel like I have been gone far too long."

"You have," he said. "Everything in your world has changed, while their world has stayed the same. Now, you are bringing some of your new world to them."

Ambrena shook her head. "I don't know if anyone else has died. Dan said he thought Glenna left, and went back to Yananda's in Almond."

"Rusty and Corandra won't be there either, and you'll miss those three the most, won't you?" Marken looked into her eyes.

Ambrena nodded. "Everyone I am closest to may be gone."

Falena touched her shoulder. "We will be there with you. Don't be afraid."

Marken took Shara's hand and walked ahead with her.

"You are usually the strong one?" Falena shifted her gatherboard to keep it from falling.

"I learned the healing skills of both types, the mental and the physical. I did everything I could to find my skill."

"I am sure they've missed you while you've been gone."

"Then why did they send me away? They knew there was no answer in Shims."

Falena walked on in silence for ways. "Look deep inside. What would you tell Rusty or Corandra? I think you'll find the answer."

Wit cried again.

Falena took him from his mother.

Treny caught up with her daughter.

Ambrena watched them all, walking in front of her now. All their physical burdens were nearly the same size and weight. Their

emotional ones varied. Falena was the freest of the adults. She'd always have a villa to go back to. Marken's weight didn't appear to trouble him with the laughing child at his side. She knew his inner pain and fear. Treny, she couldn't decipher. Was it fear, excitement, or even anger at being forced back here that she felt? Was she so afraid of losing a second daughter, that she would give her away to the first person who came along, rather than face her first daughter?

Her feet felt heavier with each step. Before, she had always been the one to lighten the load for others. Today, it wouldn't happen. They reached the horse lodge. At first glance, it was empty. Then, a horse whinnied, and several raced from the brushy shadow at the other end.

Ambrena took the lead as they came nearer the villa of Shells.

Dogs barked an alert at her, and the strangers in her midst.

Hens cackled.

Children ran out of lodges to stare at the strangers, a rare sight.

Ambrena gulped.

She walked to the treasury hoping Zella and Tanna would be there. Alone.

Marken glanced at her.

A little girl ran up to her. It wasn't Pamma.

"Are Zella and Tanna in the treasury?"

The girl nodded and took her hand.

The people of Shells stepped out of lodges and followed them.

Ambrena stopped at the open entry. She felt as if she were spying.

Tanna and Robin, played with Ola, lying on a fur between them.

Zella and Dover sorted windsun covers nearby.

Marken brushed her arm.

Ambrena stepped inside.

Tanna gasped and dropped a string on Ola's face.

Robin sat up straighter.

Zella and Dover turned to the entry.

Chapter 44

The grass waved in front of Corandra. She sneezed again. The sun sunk over the Grass Sea. She wouldn't make it to Shells tonight. In fact, she wasn't sure where Shells was located.

A backward glance showed no sign of Ellie's travels. Almost as if she had been dropped from the sky into the spot she stood. The grass all around was unbroken.

A warm forehead in the setting sun wasn't normal for this season. Corandra had to find a safe place to sleep for the night, and go on in the morning. She pushed on until she reached a pond. At least there was brush she could hide underneath.

Ellie dashed for the water. Corandra slid off into the water and drank beside her. Staying in the water all night would be safer, with not feeling well. She struggled to tread water, and looked around.

A beaver lodge rose up in the middle of the pond. An unusual place, as they were normally on pond edges, or in the middle of a stream. It must mean lions visited regularly, or water levels changed often. She urged Ellie to the lodge, while holding on to her tail. Scrambling up the side was painful. Her knees scraped on the sticks and twigs that held the lodge together.

With what strength remained, she pulled her gatherboard off Ellie's back and slid to a sitting position on the woven twigs. It would be a long night. A few deep breaths hurt her chest. Too tired to look for food, she stretched out as well as she could on the rocking lodge.

A lion roared in the distance.

Corandra rolled over and splashed into the water.

Ellie lipped her hand.

Something brushed against her legs in the water.

Corandra jumped back onto the lodge.

A beaver hopped out of the water and chattered at her.

The lion roared again, closer.

At the edge of the pond, two yellow spots glowed in the moonlight.

Panting, she pulled herself onto the lodge roof and waited. A lion wouldn't normally swim. Ellie wouldn't be much protection. She

couldn't let Ellie sacrifice herself. If no one came for her, she'd never make it back to Shells without her.

Ellie stayed close.

Corandra leaned against her.

The ledge Ellie stood on kept her knees above the water, barely.

More yellow spots flickered on and off around the pond.

Corandra dozed as she could. A lack of sleep wouldn't help when morning came. Somehow, she had to escape the lions and find her way across the Grass Sea to Shells.

Sometime during the night, she moved and part of the lodge fell in. The dunking in the water felt cool and refreshing. Submerging would end all of her troubles, and the troubles she had brought to the Pit Miners. No one would know. Lacking the energy to swim or hold on, she floated on her back.

Something nudged her.

She pulled away.

A beaver swam at her feet, and Ellie stood by her side.

Dying here would probably kill this beaver, and his or her whole lodge. Corandra gulped. She had to struggle to reach the lodge. Or, swim into the lion's mouth.

The bright spots on the beach hypnotized her. She wanted to go to them, and offer herself into their gaze. Her arms couldn't pull her through the water.

The lion roared. More bright yellow spots blinked open and stared in her direction.

Ellie nuzzled her closer to the lodge.

The beaver leaped to the top, pulling twigs that had fallen into the water and chattering.

Corandra gasped and shivered in the moonlight. She pulled herself back onto the lodge and felt her forehead. Clammy and cold now. Not a good sign. Zande and his death danced in her memory. She hugged her knees, shivered, and waited. Water on her cheeks could be from the pond, or tears.

The sun peeked over the horizon of tall grass.

Several lions snoozed beside the pond.

No way she could escape without them noticing, and following her and Ellie. No food for Ellie either.

With a sigh, she pulled her damp fur around her shoulders. The sun would not be summer warm today. Chills racked her body. She tried to nibble dried nutria, only to find her throat too tight to swallow. As the heat welled up inside again, she slipped into the water and drank deeply.

She couldn't escape from the lions. However, she could help the beaver. Swimming no more than a few body lengths away, she pulled the twigs back to the beaver lodge, so it could be more easily repaired. Ellie helped, pushing those around her toward Corandra.

With as many gathered as she could reach, she pulled herself back onto the lodge to warm up in the sun.

Ellie would have to climb out of the water soon. The ledge she had been standing on kept her feet in the water, and that would be dangerous.

Corandra couldn't watch her go. She pulled a large stick from the pile, and climbed on Ellie's back. They'd have to try to escape.

She turned the camel as far from the lions as she could.

Ellie swam toward the shore. As she scrambled up the bank, a lion's roar startled them.

It jumped out from behind a pile of brush.

Corandra slid off and back into the water.

Ellie turned and swam back to the beaver lodge.

Water covered her eyes, and she pulled herself above the water level enough to see the yellow paw turned toward her. If Goddess Kafa were here now, she would either save her, or swallow her. She went limp, and closed her eyes so she couldn't see the lion's jaws as they reached closer.

A thundering of hooves and splashing all around, startled her. Opening her eyes, she saw a herd of zebra racing into the pond.

Lions roared and attacked.

Spears flew at the lions.

Zebras squealed. One close to Corandra had streaks of blood on its flanks.

Corandra grabbed its mane, to avoid being trampled.

The noise, confusion, and splashing of water finally ended.

Opening her eyes again, she found herself on a dry fur near the water's edge.

A fire blazed nearby. A man, not much older than she, sat beside it. He looked in her direction, though he seemed to be looking right through her.

She lifted herself up on her elbow. Something about him was familiar.

He held his finger to his lip and stirred a cooking bowl. Before long, he brought her a gourd of warm broth.

She reached for the gourd, and her fingers tingled as she touched his. Strange. He was real, wasn't he?

Her eyes looked toward, and through his. She shivered. The tea tasted strange. Bitter. Much like one of Zella's medicines, though with a different taste. After draining the gourd, she handed it back. If the drink had been poisoned, she wouldn't know. At least she could drift off into sleep, hopefully painlessly. Perhaps the Goddesses had seen fit to let her die this way, instead of as a lion's meal.

He pointed to the fur, picked up his spear, and turned toward the fire.

Something about him was strange. He was there, and he wasn't. His image flickered before her. She had seen something like that somewhere before. Not long ago.

She sighed. Too sore and tired to move, she snuggled under the fur. There'd be no travel today. Returning to Shells with this sickness would be too dangerous. In the morning, she'd try. If she felt better, and found Ellie.

Ellie's lips nuzzled her forehead. She giggled, even though it hurt. Touched the camel's nose, and curled up even tighter.

The wind rustled through the grass, and the fire blazed. Embers leaped and danced before her eyes.

Corandra coughed as she stared at the flames and dozed, remembering Zande's death with every sneeze, cough, or cold chill.

Chapter 45

A wild river stretched across the landscape. Water cascaded over rocks, and tree branches played tug with frothy bubbles. An untamed wilderness, out of the ancestor's legends. A place to explore, for those more stout of soul than Rusty imagined herself, or Henry.

"We'll turn here," Brix said. "It should be a short walk from here to the villa, no burb, of Kees."

"How many do you think are there?" Rusty asked.

Brix steered his horse down a trail more suited for walking than riding. Kees had to have a wider trail nearby for the elephants.

"Surely more than four people attacked Tree Burb."

"The people might have gone looking for Vendon and Xile." If they had, they could be anywhere.

They rode along in silence, with the rest of the hunters behind them. The elephants crushed through the underbrush. The birds no longer sang, and rabbits hopped away from the trail.

Brix and Rusty reached the end of the trail.

Outside, in an open area sat seven shoulder high, long, low, clear lodges. Two had roofs open to the air. Those had grass growing in them. A third grew baby plants, not even producing food, even though growing season was long over.

Rusty walked forward and looked in the fourth and fifth one. Vegetables grew as ripe and ready to eat as the end of summer. Squash, beans, and melons grew together. The closed clear, glass lodge roof had water drops on the tops and sides, making it feel as if she were looking at an underwater garden.

Sunlight shimmered through the glass. Smooth to the touch, it joined with unruined metal supports. Through the glistening water drops, a beautiful harvest awaited anyone who knew how to reach it. The people of Kees had to be somewhere near, the ones Vendon and Xile left at the burb to repair boats.

"I'll find them. We need this technology of the ancients." Rusty stepped back and peeked over the top of the glass lodges. To be able to grow food all winter, or even into early winter would make life so much easier. Then, a smaller harvest at other seasons wouldn't be an issue. They could travel, meet new people, and not

be so bound to one spot during the growing season. If Zella had fresh vegetables anytime for nutria stew, she would be happy. And, with the glass, the nutria couldn't eat their vegetables.

Brushy trees grew a distance away. Anyone, or anything, could be hiding in them.

"I see the other side of the path," Brix said.

He pointed the way between the glass lodges.

"Wait. Let me go ahead alone. Don't bring the elephants."

"Are you sure?"

Rusty gulped and nodded. The trail between the lodges was too narrow for the elephants. The people of Kees wouldn't risk their glass lodges. Without leaving Brix and the rest of their group where they were, she would have no leverage. A short narrow stick would be strong enough to slice a spider web, not enough to scare people.

She squared her shoulders and stepped into the brush. The short tunnel led to a sunlit open area with many lodges, almost as many as three villas together. No sign of people, barking dogs, or clacking hens. An eerie silence settled around her.

"People of Kees, please come out. We aren't here for revenge against what Vendon and Xile did to us." Rusty glanced quickly across the open area. A few shadows shifted out of sight. No one, and no sound, appeared in front of her.

Leaves rustled behind her. Jasey's "hello" grunt followed.

Rusty glanced back. No one else had followed her. Good. They could check out a few lodges and see if any living people were there. They may have repaired the boats and gone after their families, or even been attacked by Marken's villa. Fear such as this had been unknown to Rusty, since a small child. She didn't welcome it now. Reaching for Jasey's hand, she stepped forward.

They approached the first lodge. Its entry was covered by layered wood. Two body length's away, a dog barked in warning.

Rusty did her best to appear as small and young as Jasey.

"Please come out. We've brought your elephants back. We need help."

Jasey pushed the wood piled around the entry away.

A small dog leaped out and barked at them. No one was inside.

"They have to be here somewhere." Rusty gripped Jasey's hand and walked down to the river.

A large wood construction, not at all like the long and thin boats from Leana, was tied to a pile of brush. As long and wide as nearly two average lodges, it jostled on the river's ripples. She could see over the edges and into the boat. Wood boxes and rope were scattered about. Women and children huddled in a corner as far from the shore as possible.

Spears bristled at her from the front of the boat.

"We are not Vendon and Xile."

"Are they with you?" A male voice asked from behind the boat wall.

"No," Rusty said. "They are not. We brought the elephants back."

A woman's voice yelled from the back of the boat, "You and the boy are not alone."

"No. Trust us. We know what Vendon and Xile did to Tree Burb."

The women hid their faces. Some covered the ears of children.

One man stood up. "Ashamed of what they did. If they'd waited, food would've been ready to harvest. They killed a man, a woman, and two children."

Rusty closed her eyes and nodded. "I guess that is why Tree Burb stole my only brother. They tried to attack us, thinking we were Kees."

She half turned away, with a finger wave to Jasey to remain alert.

"Are you going to leave the elephants?" The man asked.

Rusty shook her head. "I won't be responsible for what they do to your glass lodges." She took two steps back.

The man leaped in front her and pointed his spear at her.

"Where did you leave Vendon and Xile?"

Rusty quivered. Desperate to keep her legs and voice from shaking, she reached out and pushed the spear away. "Last they were seen, they were tied to their own huntboards, with two hungry male lions nibbling their noses." She strode into the brush, back toward the path with a signal to Jasey to follow.

If she were right, the people from Kees would follow. If she were wrong, they'd kill her and Jasey. She held her breath and kept

walking. When she reached the brushy tunnel, Jasey's hand reached for hers.

Brix and several other people she knew waited across the clearing.

She held up her hand to wait. Her best place for safety, and answers, was in the middle of the glass lodges. When she reached that point, she and Jasey turned to look over the crowd who had followed her from the Kees' boat.

"How many of you are here?" Rusty asked.

One man came forward. "About twenty now. Vendon and Xile had hoped to rescue the other survivors, when we can build another boat. They went in search of supplies to build a rescue boat."

"He stole me and three others to help him. The pit where your ancestors have dug is mostly empty, much as ours is. There may be more, somewhere. Meanwhile, you have plenty of food. Something we don't have."

The man nodded. "You think supplies are all gone?"

"I'm not so sure the ancients buried these artifacts for us to find and use. We have to learn to make what we need ourselves. Will you promise to not attack Tree Burb, and the Pit Miners?"

"We have no reason to. Anyway, we are mostly the gardeners. The fighters aren't here. They stayed behind, hoping they could survive and hunt until we could return," the man said.

Women and children crowded up behind him. "Where is Yall? She can help us."

Rusty's eyes closed. Her hands rested gently on the glass lodge filled with vegetables ready to be picked. "The elephants stampeded. Ambrena did everything she could to keep Yall alive. Marken is with Ambrena now, or you could ask him."

The woman covered her eyes. "She was our hope. Our only hope. I don't even want to send a boat to the survivors. If we don't, they'll kill us if they ever make it back here."

"Is there a chance they'll manage to return before winter?" Rusty asked.

"Not likely," the spokesman said.

Rusty smiled. "I have a plan. Is your boat trust worthy?"

He nodded.

"Fine. Dismantle your lodges, pack them, and the food, and go north. These glass lodges look like they can be dismantled."

The women nodded. "We move them occasionally to grow on fresher ground."

"Travel beyond the place your people would dig. More villas are up river. Go beyond even them. As far as you can go. If you work hard, a few days should be all you need."

A woman wrung her hands and came up to Rusty. "It'll take more than one trip, won't it?"

"Could be. However, the elephants can help you move upriver faster, and float back down even quicker. That way, everyone is busy at once. Don't disappear completely. Marken will need to be able to find you, so all of the villas can work together to protect everyone. We need your help. The Kees survivors may return and attack all the villas they can find."

The man turned to the people remaining from Kees.

Many nodded.

"A new start would be perfect," one woman said. "I'm tired of traveling constantly at others demands."

The spokesman turned to Rusty. "We will try your plan. Will you give us our elephants back?"

Brix strode up beside her. "We will, with a simple, temporary exchange. Five of our villa members will remain here to help you move. In the meantime, one woman, and two almost adult males will come with us. Someone has to go to Tree Burb and inform them they are safe."

The man closed his eyes. "Take my sister's two sons."

Rusty stepped back. "They must go willingly. It'd be better to take two who are not siblings. Tree Burb may want to keep them to replace those who died."

It didn't take long to sort who would go, and who would stay.

As the two almost adults said goodbye to their mother, Rusty's heart ached. At least they had had a chance to grow up. Zande didn't. If Glenna ever came back to Shells, and things settled down they'd have to talk about the hurt deep inside them both. The child she wanted couldn't be a replacement for Zande. He, or she, would have to be wanted as much as the no longer living child had been.

Brix touched her shoulder, "Come on. It's a long walk back to Shims."

Rusty touched the roof of the glass lodge.

The people would harvest their food tonight, and then take them apart in the morning. The roof panels transport would be difficult, as they might shatter or crumble. The plants could be transplanted to the north, wherever they went.

Next spring, she would follow and learn the secret of the glass lodges. With Henry, if he survived.

If they were lucky, the rest of Kees inhabitants would never return, and never hurt another person.

If they did return, the Pit Miners would have three additional villas to join and protect the group, as well as the ancestral knowledge each had retained. Perhaps Marken's villa, and others he had briefly mentioned, along the river would join with them as well.

Rusty would do her best to use the ancestor's artifacts for good, and bring a new future to the much larger Pit Miners, who now needed another name. That would be Ambrena's skill to find at the Spring Trade.

For now, all she wanted was to return to Henry and Glenna, and build a new future using the skills she would learn from all the new villas and burbs.

Chapter 46

Ambrena tried to back out of the Shells' treasury. No words of welcome. Silence greeted her.

Marken steadied her arm.

"Maybe I shouldn't have come back." Tears slid down her cheek.

Zella hobbled up to hug her. "Of course you had to return. Where else would you go? You surprise us with unknown visitors. And no sign of Rusty, or Corandra."

Falena tapped her shoulder.

Ambrena hugged Zella back, and stepped aside. "This is Falena."

Falena took Zella's hand and nodded. "My story will wait. I want to hear of you first. And Treny here has a story to tell."

Shara pulled away from her mother and grabbed Ambrena's hand. "You promised me! Where is she?"

Ambrena touched the young girl's lips with her finger. "We will find her."

She walked to Tanna.

Shara clung to her leg.

"How are you Tanna? Ola looks like she's doing well."

Tears trickled down Tanna's face. "She's not so well. I've been sick. Ola had the jerks. Babies with that, don't do well." The pain in her eyes reached out for help no one could offer.

"I'll help her," Shara said. "We had a boy who couldn't walk live in Leana for a while. His friends used to put him on a log, and drag him anywhere he wanted to go."

"I didn't see him," Ambrena said.

Shara shook her head and patted Ola's cheek. "He went to Mills to learn to carve wood."

"Even a skill was found for him. That's wonderful. You'd help Ola?" Ambrena watched the child's eyes carefully. It was sadly unlikely her mother would care. A reason to stay with Shells, would give her a lodge, even if Ola needed help every day of her life. Ola was too young to guess what future she might have lost.

Shara rubbed Ola's arms and legs. "She needs someone like me, I think."

Tanna laughed. Not like her carefree laugh, from not so long ago. "She has a sister your age, and a brother too. As well as Ambrena, Corandra, Rusty, and Henry to look out for her."

Tears glistened in Shara's eyes. She looked up into Tanna's eyes. "If they are ever too busy, remember me."

Ambrena wanted to hug Shara. Her eyes showed the same ache for belonging and feeling secure in her place that Ambrena had felt for as long as she could remember. She reached out and touched the younger girl's arm. "Shara, you will always be welcome to find me."

Shara pulled away from Ambrena and pointed to Ola. "You don't need me. She does."

Ola cried out and reached her fist into the air.

Tanna pulled her closer. "She hasn't cried much. Come here, Shara."

Shara crawled over and touched Ola's leg. "Hush little one. Someday, we'll find our way."

Tanna placed the infant beside Shara and stood up. "Come in, and tell us your tales."

Could this young girl, calming an infant really be the wild, flighty thing she followed down the trail? Ambrena sat near them, and waited, forgetting to introduce the new comers.

Marken sat behind her, and nudged her shoulder.

His touch woke flighty feelings deep inside she had forgotten. Blushing, she turned to Zella. "Marken was with the two bad men of Kees. He came with me, because he has no other place to go now. When Yall died, he helped Brix protect Jasey, Rusty, and me."

Tanna handed a teacup to Falena. "Tell us your story."

Falena took the cup and glanced from Tanna to Zella. "From what Ambrena, Rusty, and even Treny have told me, I am what you would call a rattler child. I, like Shara, have come in search of the much older sister I never knew."

Ambrena waited. She didn't want to break the silence. Zella's reaction would mean so much to all of the travelers.

Ola gurgled.

Falena reached her hands out to Zella. "I am so glad to have found you. Even though our mother never wanted to leave you behind, she died thinking you were safe. When Jorn came to us,

she had already been dead many seasons. Perhaps, if she had still been alive, she might have made the trip back here."

Zella's arm quivered.

"I hope I did the right thing bringing her here," Ambrena said. "It was the one way I knew to convince the villa of Leana to help us. Rusty found something. Gerry from Mills, knows how to make it talk, so we can learn more medical lore that has been lost. Won't you and Dover go and hear it?"

"Perhaps Brael from Shims can go with you and Gerry before Spring Trade," Dover said.

Zella nodded. Tears sparkled in her eyes. "I always wondered why she left. Did you leave Jorn behind?"

Falena nodded. "He insisted on staying with the boats, as if they couldn't take care of themselves. Then, he followed us to Shims, and is with Quan." She laughed. "I think he was afraid you didn't want to see him."

Zella snorted. "Of course I do. I always thought he was my brother, until Tanna found out otherwise."

Tanna gasped.

"Yes daughter, he told me before he left that you knew, what he had suspected." Zella turned to Tanna. "I figured he'd come back, someday."

"Is waiting on him why Tanna and Robin never started searching for other villas to trade with?" Ambrena asked.

Tanna nodded. "That, and there was community rebuilding, and so many orphans to raise, there was no chance to plan and prepare exploration trips. We had to wait until we had a herd of horses too. I had hoped one of your gen could pick up our dreams, now that there are enough people and animals."

"Treny, did you want to come?" Robin asked.

She shook her head, and leaned over her infant son.

"I wanted to come to meet my sister. She said I could," Shara said.

"So you came," Robin said. "Will you stay, and allow your mother to go back to Leana if she wants to?"

Shara glanced at all the faces. "Will she leave Wit here with me?"

Treny held the child close. "He is not ready to leave me."

Ola kicked Shara's arm.

Shara sighed and touched Ola's foot. "Then, I must stay and care for Ola. Wit can come next season if he wants."

Surely, Tanna and Zella wouldn't take another child due to Shara's desire to help an infant at this stage in their lives. Tanna would need every ounce of energy to take care of her two older children. They needed her most now. "Where are Pamma and Garn?"

"Myrya took them fishing. They're fine. Most of the children did well after you left."

"Does that mean," Ambrena couldn't finish her sentence. Her own unknown history could be to blame. No one had known if her mother had chosen to have a child when she was born. After her mother's death in the fire Ambrena barely remembered, no one ever asked.

Zella reached for her hand. "Neither you, nor Rusty, nor even Corandra, are to blame. I had hoped your trip would help you see that."

Ambrena looked deep into her eyes. "You weren't sending me away?"

Zella closed her eyes and squeezed Ambrena's hand. "Of course not. Your own fear and pain was hurting you so much, it was hurting everyone around you. I hoped the trip would be good for you. I had no idea what would happen."

Tears brimmed in her eyes. Ambrena wiped them, struggling not to cry. "I wanted to find my place, and feel like I belonged."

Robin reached for her hands. "We need you here with us. Like we need Rusty and Corandra, wherever she is. Where is Rusty anyway?"

"Rusty went on with everyone else to Kees," Marken said. "We have to return to Shims in the morning. Henry is ill. Wenda is watching him. I hope he recovers soon, so we can hunt and travel together." His eyes teared, as Ambrena's did.

"I'll stay here," Falena said. "If my sister will have me."

"Of course," Zella said.

A tiny sand colored puppy peeked its head out from under a fur beside Ola. Shara squealed with delight and picked it up.

The entry cover flapped open. Corandra staggered in with a yellow box and dropped to her knees. Her gatherboard slid off her shoulder and thumped to the floor.

Zella gasped.

Robin glanced at Zella and hurried to Corandra. "What happened?"

"Water. Zella." She pointed to the box.

Tanna carried water to her.

Robin picked up the yellow box and handed it to Zella.

Chapter 47

Corandra tossed and turned on the floor of the treasury. Knowing where she was; was one thing. Doing something about it; was another. "Zella. Ellie."

Voices hovered around her. Hands touched her. She felt, and heard, and it all passed into a dream. Someone lifted her, and poured warm soup into her mouth. Zella's favorite, nutria stew. Maybe she hadn't thrown her out into the cold as winter approached.

Her head stopped turning. She pulled herself up on her elbow. "Henry?"

Zella came to her. "Calm down now. You're exhausted."

"Where is Henry?" She pushed the cup away that Zella held for her.

"He will be here soon."

A small hand grabbed hers. "Drink tea. You need it, so I can hear your tales."

Corandra pulled back and stared at the small girl beside her. No one asked to hear her tales, other than Henry. "Who are you?"

The girl glanced at Zella. "I'll tell you later. Drink."

Corandra shook her head at the scene before her. So many people she had never seen before in the Shells' treasury. "Zella, what was it? What was in the box?"

Zella helped her sit up and handed her the cup. "Did you make the one drawing?"

Corandra nodded. Her head spun.

Zella smiled. "I wish I could have been there with you to see what led you to draw such a feature. Did it really look like that?"

"Rocks similar to those in the part of Shelpit I found the red box." Corandra sipped her tea.

"It's safe," Zella said. "Inside was a message from the ancestors. Thank you for bringing it to me."

"What does it mean?"

"We'll figure it out together, all of us, once Henry returns."

"I have to go," Corandra said.

"Not in the night," Zella said. "In the morning, you may go with Ambrena and Marken to meet Rusty and Henry. We must prevent any more battles."

Corandra finished her tea, and sat the gourd down. The blazing fire flickered on so many faces watching her. "Ellie?"

"Ellie is standing," Robin said. "She will need to rest a few days. Her lodge is the only place she'll be until she recovers."

Corandra slipped off to half sleep. Off course, she had ridden Ellie too hard. Ellie had stumbled outside Shells. Corandra had run ahead, planning to go back and care for her. If Ellie didn't survive, her hopes for the future were ruined.

A small hand clutched hers and squeezed.

Corandra opened her eyes.

"Hi. Feel better?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm Shara. Everyone went to go do chores. Let's go see Ellie. I've never seen a camel before."

Corandra laughed. "Never?" She sat up and rubbed a bump on her elbow.

"Once, from a long distance with the hunters." Shara pulled her arm, "Let's go."

"Let me take my gatherboard."

"We'll be back. Leave it here."

Corandra led the chatty girl to the edge of the horse and camel lodge.

Ellie shuffled up and snuffled them both. Her eyes looked tired, and her legs didn't want to move at their normal pace. "Sorry Ellie. You can rest here. I'll be back for you soon."

Shara reached up and patted the camel's nose. "I'll feed you while sis is gone."

Corandra stared at her.

Shara closed her mouth, pouted, and then stared back. "They didn't want me to tell you. If I don't, you might not come back. Please come back. I've wanted to meet you ever since I've known about you."

Corandra took her hand and led her back through Shells. "Are you sure?"

Shara nodded.

"I'll be back." She stopped to catch her breath. She'd have to borrow a horse to go see Henry. "Where is Ambrena? Is she going?"

"Ambrena and Marken went to the lake to speak to the Goddess Kafa. Tell me about her." Shana took her hand and skipped along beside her.

This strange child, her sister, wasn't afraid of her like all the other Pit Miner children. Unlike others, she looked up at her, grinned, asked questions, and told her what she thought. No running and hiding from her. If she really was her sister, she'd like to know her better. Someone who trusted her would mean so much.

At the treasury, they chatted more as they waited. Shara had so many questions. No personal questions, though they brimmed on the border of spilling out, as Shara fought to hold them in, and changed them to not seem intrusive. Even though she fought back the questions, Corandra knew they would come, unlike the local children, who feared her, and wouldn't dream of asking them. Shara waited, bouncing with anticipation trying to egg the answers she most wanted through a revolving, and hawk like, circling of thoughts.

Treny walked in and sat down with Wit. "How are you?"

The temperature in the treasury dropped, the wind howled through the entry and windsuns.

"Better. Will you come with us?"

Treny nodded. "The sooner to return to Leana. I brought Shara to you. I will send Wit next Spring Trade, if you want him."

Corandra's jaw dropped. "I want to know my mother, not have her abandon my siblings for me to raise. I am not an adult." Even if she had been given her adulthood necklace, it had to be a mistake. She wasn't ready.

"Shara said she wanted to live with you instead of me." Treny pushed the crawling baby toward them, and backed away.

Shara gasped. "No Mother, I want you to be with all of us."

Corandra took her hand. "Maybe I can come live with you, after I see Henry."

Treny shook her head. "The gen four grandmother, and Zella were right. Corandra, you resemble your sponsor, in many ways. I cannot watch you. Sadly, even Shara and Wit's faces remind me of

you, which reminds me of him, and those evil days. I cannot do as Zella's mother did and move on. I will go back to Leana, and you will stay here, where you belong."

"I don't belong here!" Corandra shouted. "Don't abandon us." Tears welled in her eyes. She fought them back.

"I'm hardly abandoning you. You have Tanna, Robin, Zella, Dover, Henry, Rusty, and Ambrena. You aren't dumped on the plains for the lions." Treny fingered the blanket Wit had crawled out of.

Corandra felt rage beyond any she had ever known. For once, she would try to control it. Goddess Amber and Kafa had heard her request. She couldn't ruin it. "If you had left me for the lions when I was born, would you be able to raise Shara and Wit?"

Treny looked up into her eyes. "I don't know. I can't answer that now. If I had gone back and done that act, would I have grieved the loss of your life, and so never asked to have another child?"

Shara pulled Wit up against Corandra. "Momma don't leave us."

Treny stood up, and walked to the entry. "Someday, you'll understand." Without looking back, she walked out.

Corandra wanted to bury her head in her gatherboard and cry, like she had when everyone in the villa turned away from her. Shara and Wit wouldn't understand. She had to be strong for them.

Shara's tears brimmed over and raced down her cheeks as she rested her head on Corandra's knee.

Zella walked in the entry, closed her eyes and struggled to remain upright. She walked over and picked up Wit. "Corandra?"

Corandra gulped. If Treny left, another mother would have to be found for Wit, as Treny had mothered Henry. The next gen would be the same as this one. Again, it was her fault. The Goddess had given her one last chance to set everything right. "Yes?"

"You and Ambrena will leave soon. Don't try to change Treny's mind."

Corandra looked down at her gatherboard. "I'm sorry."

Zella sat in front of her. "Corandra, when will you understand? It isn't your fault. You helped, more than you will ever know. You will return soon, and I think you will bring Tanna and Robin's dream to life. I would rather have two wanted orphans now, than dozens later

if Rusty and Ambrena had not found out about Tree Burb and Kees."

Wit struggled out of Zella's arms. "By the way, Ambrena found something at that place they had to dig."

"I know, I saw it to! I wanted to go back with her. Will you come? You'd know what it is."

Zella laughed. "An old woman like me travel? No. Take Falena. She knows as much as I do. I do not know if she will stay with us, or go back to Leana."

"I want to know Treny before she leaves."

"She will walk with you to Shims, and await the rest of Leana villa to return with them, I think. Use the day wisely. I think you will."

Ambrena entered the treasury. She touched Wit's head. Her gatherboard was so full; she couldn't stuff anything else in, or on it, and carry it. "Come on, let's go. Tanna will be here for Shara and Wit soon."

Shara picked up the sandy puppy as it waddled by. "Don't forget her!"

"She's not mine," Corandra said. "If you stay here, some day you will have a dog."

Ambrena laughed. "The sandy puppy slept in your arms all night. I think she chose you. Though, she has to stay with her mother for now. Kara made pretty babies, didn't she?"

Corandra nodded and pulled herself up. By going, at least she could talk to her mother. "Take good care of her, till I return." She patted the puppy.

Shara sat beside her. Tears rolled down her face.

"Or, should I stay?" Corandra asked.

Shara shook her head. "Go. I'll be waiting for your tales. Soon, I'll be big enough we can travel together. Who would take care of Ellie if I go?"

Corandra hugged her. "I'd almost forgot her! Finding a sister, brother, and mother will do that to you. I'll miss her."

Zella patted her shoulders, a mist in her own eyes. "You'll be back to Shells soon."

Ambrena and Marken waited with horses at the edge of the clearing. Ambrena and Rusty's futures looked bright to her as well.

More opportunities here, and wherever their future trade travels would take them.

Corandra pulled her gatherboard on her back and walked down the path from the treasury. At Zella's lodge, she glanced back and waved to Shara, Zella, and Tanna. A puppy who needed a name wiggled at Shara's feet. She'd be back soon. Her sister needed her.

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Thanks!

Gail Brown

About the Author

Gail Brown began reading at far too young an age. Her preferred reading material was nonfiction, with biographies and science being at the forefront of her library excursions.

Her ability to memorize and use all the grammar rules in school years led to working in the school library while classmates caught up. All of those rules, and diagramming sentences was easy and relaxing. For many years. All forgotten now. Except the joyful memories of preparing the library for others to use.

Along the way, she found fiction and science fiction to help bring hope and light to a world of colorful dreams. A world where disability was accepted, people lived their lives without overwork and fear.

As an adult, gardening, and preparing the garden bounty, was her way to relax. To think. To make order out chaos.

Other Books by Gail Brown

Concurrent Earths

Concurrent Earths is collection containing 40 short stories of Earth, or almost Earth, that may, or may not, exist.

These stories reach to us across the stars. They share a thought, a dream, or a hope. Stories that touch the heart and soul.

Whether a single individual, a community, or a society, each story delves into specific situations, and how they might benefit society.

Or, how they might go wrong.

Very wrong.

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Memories of a war they have never seen cross the dimensional boundary to Kalara and Leonard.

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For Shalin and Jendal on Earth, the dreams are peaceful and serene. A beauty in life they have never seen.

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Trails Series

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Pair 1, Book 1
Trails 1: Fault Lines

Pair 1, Book 2
Trails 2: Volcano

Disaster builds on disaster.

The Earth shakes and begins the process of opening the Rio Sea, where once a great ocean thrived.

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